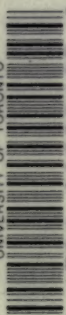


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# SPLENDID BROTHER

W. PETT RIDGE

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# SPLENDID BROTHER

BY

W.<sup>m</sup> PETT RIDGE

AUTHOR OF "MORD 'EM'LY," ETC.

THIRD EDITION



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Mrs BLAND-SUTTON

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# SPLENDID BROTHER

## CHAPTER I

### LEN AT THE PIER

SEVERAL times during the late afternoon my mother fancied she heard the bell ringing, and I was sent to make inquiries, whilst the rest of the party took as subject for discussion, "Whatever would happen if we missed the boat?"

Aunt Mabel and her two daughters had the view that if you went to law you could make the company pay damages; my mother held it would be possible to get back by the North Kent line, admitting however this might entail some argument at the station. I found myself ordered to put a question to every gentleman in the Gardens who appeared likely to own a watch; one, to whom I incautiously appealed a third time, offered to present me with his Waterbury.

"Just as a token of long friendship," he suggested. "What, you won't accept it? Very well, then. Only," with sudden change of manner, "if you come asking me again, I shall, in all probability, wring your blooming young neck for you. I'm getting tired of you! I find your conversation monotonous. You harp too much on the same subject. I shan't weep if I never see you again. Understand?"

The cousins and I gained permission to have a last look round, and left the parents to themselves; my mother telling Aunt Mabel what slow payers New Cross people were, and aunt telling my mother that the business at Peckham had now become little better than an expensive hobby, one

voyagers began to dance, and looking over my shoulder I observed my two cousins were being asked for the favour of a waltz, no desire to join in such frivolous games affected me. This was Monday. I had left the schools in Edward Street on the previous Friday afternoon with a handshake from the head master, and a wish for success. The head master said he supposed I was going to be a clerk, and when I remarked, with a mannish air, that the market appeared to be overcrowded, he replied this was the everlasting condition of all markets, and that unless something were done to keep the foreigner out, England would go to the dogs; at Catford, where he lived, he had a German family on either side. We came to no decision in the matter, so far as any practical steps were concerned, but I felt greatly complimented, and to my friend Ernest Fowler gave the head master's opinions as my own. Ernest said that what was wanted seemed to him to be a fixed standard wage.

The cousins, flushed by the dancing, came up fanning themselves with handkerchiefs and telling each other not to be so stupid; Aunt Mabel wished me to rejoin the company of herself and my mother instantly. I put on my cap, which had been taken off to allow the breeze to give coolness and deliberation to my thoughts, and went across. The young woman's baby was asleep with a look of repletion on its creased little features.

"Sit you down," ordered my mother, in hopeless tones. "Your aunt has something to say to you, and if you know how to behave, do for goodness sake leave off sniffing, and listen to what she's got to say." She surveyed me, and turned to her sister. "We shall never make a man of him," she remarked, audibly, "try as we may!"

"I've been talking you over, Henry," said Aunt Mabel, resting her ringed hands on her lap, "and I've come to the decision that something's got to be done."

My mother gave a murmur of approval.

"From what one hears, there seems to be a risk that you're not going to turn out well."



My mother asked me how I dared to interrupt.

"Leave him to me," begged Aunt Mabel. "I have a pretty fair knowledge of the world. Lost my husband in '85 and ever since I've carried on the business, as you may say, off my own bat. I don't say trade is good, because it isn't, and people seem to begrudge the money more than they used to—there's never a call for mutes nowadays—but I make enough to keep myself and the girls and the men going, and when a good job comes along, why we thank Heaven for it."

My mother gave an "Ah!" that had a touch of piety, adding that it was what we must all come to sooner or later.

"If I hear," went on my Aunt Mabel determinedly, "of other firms taking a job at a lower price than we could possibly quote without losing money over it—and I never have been the one to use whales for bait—why I simply say they're welcome to it, and hope the relatives will be satisfied after the affair is all over. You may talk until you're black in the face," she wagged a forefinger at me, threateningly, "but you will never persuade me that undercutting is good for any of the parties concerned, and I don't care who you tell that to. Over and over again I've had people call round to settle up and they've said 'Mrs Martin,' and I've said 'Yes, ma'am,' or 'Yes, sir,' as the case might be."

My mother, leaning forward, gave a sharp tug to restore my wandering attention.

"'Mrs Martin,' they've said, 'thank you for the receipt, and thank you very much for all the kindness and care and consideration and attention and willingness to oblige,' and so forth and so on. And I say, 'Pray don't mention it, but if you get a chance of recommending, when the opportunity occurs, you'll be doing me a favour by speaking about me,' and so forth and so on."

I took an attitude of respectful enthusiasm.

"Never a one to believe in advertisement," she proceeded,

"at the same time I do put a bit in the *South London Press* every other week, and if you like to go and find the one of my girls that's got my purse, you'll find a newspaper-cutting inside. 'Ebenezer Martin, Meeting House Lane, Peckham, S.E. Funerals provided. Our motto, Economy with Efficiency. Distance and destination no object.' There," said Aunt Mabel, leaning back and dismissing me, "that's all I have to say, and if you, Henry, can't take good advice when it's offered, why so much the worse for you. Is this Greenwich we're coming to?"

The boat gave up half a dozen passengers and received two in exchange, a stout florid man and his daughter. Whilst those on board watched at the side and disputed concerning the exact positions of the Ship and the Trafalgar, I said to the person next to me, "You don't know who that is?" The neighbour taking cigar from his mouth retorted rapidly, "Why, hang it all, if it isn't old what's-his-name of Hatcham; rare man of business and can't tell a capital A from a pig's foot. Great boxing chap, years ago. Didn't recognise him at first in a straw hat. If that's his daughter she'll come into money when the old man drops out. He's a caution though; look at him now."

The steamer backed from the pier, and Mr Latham was waving a red pocket handkerchief to imaginary friends, calling out farewells in a husky voice and ignoring his daughter's urgent request not to play the fool. Passengers, bored with each others' eccentricities, made a circle and looked on with a new interest; the girl glanced around nervously and beckoned to me.

"Help me, Henry Drew," she whispered, "to look after him. He's met more friends than are good for him. Father," turning to him, "here's one of the boys at the schools not far from us."

"My lad," he said, closing one eye, and regarding me acutely, "stick to your ed'cation. Ed'cation's finest thing out for a boy. Without ed'cation, you're nowhere. Onless," he hedged, "onless you've got brain like mine. If you've



got brain like mine you can go anywheres and do anything. Isn' that so Kitty, my girl?"

"Sit up at this end of the boat, father," she ordered insistently, "and have a talk to Henry. I want to stroll about and see whether there's anyone here I know. Otherwise, my day will be wasted."

"Don't get into mischief, Kitty," he said, sleepily. She touched up the heavy fringe on her forehead, glanced at me and went. "Great 'sponsibility, girls," he remarked, taking off his straw hat and giving it into my charge. "Don't you never 'ave nothing to do with 'em. Give 'em the go-by. You stay 'ere and look after me, and see I don't fall overboard nor do nothing foolish. The last three pennorth," he added, self-reproachfully, "the last three pennorth! That's what done it!"

"Mr Latham," briskly giving him a shake, "do you think you could find a job for me in your business? I've left the board school, and I want to start work directly. I could run errands to begin with, and then perhaps you would take me inside, and you'd find me ready to do anything for about seven shillings a week."

"Make it ten. Always like round figures."

"I'd get there any time in the mornings you liked to mention, and if you wanted me to stay late at nights, I shouldn't grumble, and I shan't expect to be paid extra."

"Pardon me," he remarked, with laborious politeness. "You'll scuse me for interrupting, but I always make practice to pay for overtime. Speaking as man to man, I feel I ought to warn you of that. Let's have a fair and straight understanding. Latham Bros. doesn't work for nix and don't expect others to work for nix." He looked about. "Where are we now? Forest Hill?"

We were going by the Royal Victualling Yard, and he endeavoured, without much success, to repeat the information. To the new question, Mr Latham replied with an offer of his hand and a grip which made my eyes water.

"That's fixed up," he said, drowsily. "Your fortune's good

as made. Did you back Sainfoin for the Derby? Have a smoke."

The captain on the bridge decided, after looking at me and inspecting the cigar, that he would keep it for another opportunity, and as the steamer came round the bend opposite Limehouse pier, we had a most interesting conversation on the topic of the British Navy, the advisability of getting to close quarters with Russia. The captain assured me the impudent attitude of that country annoyed him to such an extent that he sometimes woke in the middle of the night, and gave hours to the task of circumventing the artifices of M. Gortschakoff. I pointed out that this statesman resigned eight years previously, but the captain said he did not trust them. Young couples went by, relaxing their affectionate demeanour as they neared us; I observed Kitty Latham had found a companion and his remark—"Do you live somewhere about here, Miss?"—suggested their acquaintanceship was not of long duration. The captain having exhausted his views on European affairs left me, and I rested in the shadow against the bridge, thinking over the highly satisfactory arrangement made with Mr Latham. The news would not be communicated until we reached Woodpecker Road, and even there the announcement might be deferred if circumstances and surroundings appeared unsuitable. Mother would be compelled to admit that I had made a start for myself; Mrs Croucher, of next door, would say I was born under a lucky star; Ernest Fowler would declare he ought to have been consulted; Milly, his sister, would say "Bravo, Henry!" The news might induce Milly Fowler to reconsider her decision to go out, so soon as she left school, to business; a deplorable intention which had prevented me from speaking to her for three weeks.

"You are an idiot, really," complained my 'cousins, in duet.

"Fancy him," said one, "mooning here instead of enjoying the trip."

"Shall tell mother," declared the second, "that next time he'd better not be asked."



"Far better to invite some one who would pay attention to us. Oh, my goodness!" Kitty Latham was going by with her companion, and the sound of a kiss came from their direction. "Come along, Henry, this is no place for you. Your poor mother would be half out of her mind if she knew we were here, looking on at the tag, rag and bob-tail."

Having endured a considerable amount of advice that day I now, with a knowledge of my future denied to the girls, felt justified in remonstrating and in ordering them not to interfere. They seem disinclined to believe their ears; their ejaculations became confused, and I followed up the advantage by assuring them I was now quite capable of taking care of myself; adding that I preferred my own company to theirs. They went off, promising to communicate details of the mutiny to their own mother and to mine, and it seemed certain the story would lose little in the telling. This mattered nothing to me. A wage earner (I thought of giving my mother eight and keeping two for clothes and general luxuries)—a wage-earner could run down to Greenwich by tram-car, or by boat to Rosherville, on special occasions, so far as Margate, and ask the consent of no one. Here were imminent my first chances of seeing the world, and I promised myself to take full and complete advantage. It made thoughts go for parallel to the freeing of slaves in America. At the moment one scarcely envied Len.

"Wake up, sir," I said to Mr Latham. "We're close on the new bridge."

"Bless my soul!" he cried. "Seem to have popped off for a moment. How are you? All right?" I hinted that my health had not changed from the state in which he had found it half an hour previously. "Course," he said, "of course, I remember. Had a long talk, didn't we, about old times. Where's Kitty? Go and find Kitty, my lad, and bring her 'ere to her poor old father. Don't stand there staring!" with violence. "Go and do as I tell you!"

The alteration in manner was welcome as proving he already regarded me in the light of one to be ordered.

Kitty Latham I found and spoke to with the respect due to the daughter of one's employer; the young man said tenderly, "Do please let us see each other again," and she answered lightly, "Perhaps, and perhaps not!" leaving the youth desolate.

"She's the apple of my eye," declared Mr Latham, talking now, after his nap, hoarsely but quite soberly. "Bit flighty, but there's no harm in it. You have to allow a bit with women, as I daresay you know. Don't do to hold the reins too tight or else they begin to kick and jib and baulk, and you have a deuce and all of a business to steady them. Made the mistake with her mother, but I was young then, and didn't rightly understand dealing with the fair sex. Ask anyone who knows me, and they'll tell you that sometimes I've made a blunder; I defy them to say they've ever known me make the same blunder twice. That's where experience comes in."

I was about to put a question concerning the hour and date for beginning work, when he turned away. "Precious little use though talking about these matters to you, my lad," he remarked, abruptly. "When I was your age, I thought I knew all there was to be known. Apart from book education."

A shout from my friend the captain on the bridge. Screams from women at the sudden arrest of the steamer, and snatch-up of straw hats on the part of men, much as though these articles were life-belts. From below in the water came a storm of furious language; entire crew of our steamer (with the exception of the captain) and many of the passengers rushed to answer this, whilst the captain swore at everybody. The boat went down slightly on that side, and I heard my mother shrieking for me; as I ran quickly here and there in the dark, stumbling over coils of rope and cannoning into people, my principal thought was that here had occurred something which would get into the newspapers.

My mother was in tears, crying that this came of gallivanting about, instead of remaining at home looking after the business; it was a judgment upon her and upon us all. Aunt

Mabel, similarly distressed, declared she had anticipated the accident from the very first, refraining only from mentioning it in a desire not to spoil the day ; admitted, however, with tears, that it had never occurred to her she would finish her life in a watery grave. My two cousins clung around me, each pleading that she should be saved first. Above the din and the wailing and the cries came the full voice of the captain on the bridge, ordering his men, with adjectives that I was acquainted with and some new to me, to stop interchange of threats and return to their duties ; he used language of only a slightly modified nature to the frightened passengers. I tried to console my womenfolk, pointing out the nearness of the banks on either side, my own presence, the well-known sturdiness of Thames steam-boats ; I held my mother's hand tightly and she leaned her head upon my shoulder, and moaned.

"Go and ask the captain if there's any danger," ordered my Aunt Mabel, hysterically. "Go at once, and tell him I sent you !"

Up to the moment of obeying this request, my self-command and my courage were perfect, constituting a matter for surprise to myself. But, running along I looked over the star-board side and a light from the window of a riverside public-house gave me a glimpse of the murky, muddy water—it is very different now—and some of my calm began to disappear ; the swimming-baths at home had advantages not shared by the Thames. It was when I succeeded in gaining the attention of the captain and when, having gained his ear I managed to bawl the inquiry, and he replied that the sooner everybody contrived to get on the tug, the more likely they were not to find themselves floundering about in the river, that all my self-possession vanished. The memory of that occasion has often made me wonder whether the wisest and most useful acts are not sometimes performed in a state of slight aberration of mind. It is certain that I lost my head, for later on I had scarcely any idea what had been done, and the facts had to be supplied by other people.



It seems I ran against Mr Latham and dragged him half the length of the steamer. There the three men on the big black tug below which had run into us (or into which we had run), were still roaring their bitter contempt for the steamer and for everyone on board, announcing vehemently that they would not lend a hand to assist unless the captain first admitted the mistake was entirely his. Away on the Wapping side a few empty boats washed to and fro gently, but no one was within hailing distance. I can remember making a workmanlike knot of a thick rope, and I recall Mr Latham saying—

“Down you go, youngster, you’re a lighter weight than what I am.”

Kitty Latham told me later that immediately I swung down upon the tug I whirled my arms about and sent the three men back; certainly one of the begrimed men later showed me his blood-streaming nose, and asked me what was meant by it. On the tug, it appears, I found a long wooden shoot, and Kitty Latham’s new companion, the next to come down the rope, helped me to fix it against the side of the tilted steamer; at once began a rapid descent of women, who no sooner reached the coal begrimed deck than they bewailed acutely the injury done to summer frocks. Mr Latham, arriving close upon my mother, recovered from the shock and, going to one of the grubby-faced men, said—

“Now I’m going to have it out with you. What’s the idea of——Hullo, George?”

“Evening, sir,” said the tug man, sheepishly. “Didn’t know you was amongst ’em. Beg pardon, I’m sure.”

Mr Latham assumed command and issued orders, exchanged shouted messages with the captain (who begged him to convey a communication at London Bridge) gave an order to his friend on the tug.

“But we was going down river, sir.”

“And now you’re going up for a change. Back water, or put her about, or turn her astern, or whatever the right expression is.”

"Should like first of all to get at the rights of this."

"You drop us all at the Old Swan pier, George, and then you can come back and argy it out to your heart's content. 'Ear what I say?"

As the crowded tug turned about two ladies told my mother she ought to be very proud of me, but she only shook her head and remarked that cleaners and dyers expected to be paid, and where the money was coming from, goodness only knew. We went under the new bridge where the workmen called out for information, and I, selected to reply, endeavoured to make the account as thrilling and romantic as possible, but one of the workmen said aggrievedly, as we went on, "What, and ain't nobody been drowned?" and it seemed one might have dared to be more extravagant. Carefully through the craft sleeping opposite the Customs-House, under London Bridge, and — "Thank goodness," said the passengers with great relief, "we're near civilisation at last!"

Mr Latham gave particulars to the pier-master, and in the confusion that ensued no tickets were collected. Aunt Mabel, whilst still taking credit for considerable foresight, blamed herself for having taken returns.

"Where's Len?" asked my mother, anxiously. "Len promised to be here to meet us and we're late!"

"Len can generally be relied upon," said my cousins.

"Is Len expected?" inquired Kitty Latham, with vivacity.

Len came swinging down the cobble stones of Old Swan Lane as we made our way towards the bridge steps. Len, in best clothes, hailing us cheerfully from a distance and giving to all of us, assuredly to me, the usual sensation of relief.

"Been looking for you all over the place," he cried, handing to each lady of our party a bunch of violets with the bow I often tried to practise when alone. "And one for you, Kitty," he added.

"Henry would never have thought of this," said my mother, sniffing delightedly at the flowers.

"Been an upset of some kind, hasn't there? Heard people talking about it as I rushed over the bridge."

"Your brother," said Kitty Latham, walking by the side of Len, "behaved capitally when the accident occurred."

"If Len had been there," said my mother, looking at her elder son admiringly, "it wouldn't have occurred at all!"

The day had been a notable one, but the incident which pleased me most came at the very end. We went down by the Brighton Railway, and Aunt Mabel, declining to come indoors at Woodpecker Road and have a brush, on the grounds that when you go down a hill you invariably have to ascend it on the home journey, directed that the others were to go in, and I was to accompany her and the two girls to New Cross Gate where a pair horse tram-car would take them to their destination. At the junction of roads, the car waited, and as they turned to say their farewells, the gratifying remark was made.

"Girls, say good-bye," ordered my aunt. "But you must only shake hands with him; he's getting too big to be kissed!"

Near the top of Clifton Hill, two of the boat passengers were being interrogated by a young man with a notebook, whom I had sometimes observed at fires in the neighbourhood; folk stood around to gain details and anxious to add particulars to assist the press. One of these stepping forward offered the information that the Christian name was Leonard; undoubtedly Leonard; knowing both the Drew lads by sight he could guarantee that Leonard was the one who had done the trick. I was about to interpose when it occurred to me that the error really did not matter, besides it might gratify Len.



## CHAPTER II

### LEN MISSING

THE departure of Len was an everyday occurrence which for me never lost any of its interest, and now that I had left school there came opportunity to watch the event with something of leisureliness. Years previously, when father was alive and we lived at Blackheath, there had been the considerable joy of regarding all the preliminaries necessary before nurse escorted my brother to an Academy for Young Gentlemen in Montpelier Place; the four years dividing us made him appear then, with large white turn-down collar, orange-coloured cap, and other grown-up apparel, to be a mature gentleman; I think these moments were more precious to me than even the occasions when we met a long line of sturdy horses and of drivers (who touched the rim of their hats to me) with carts bearing the words LEOD. DREW, CONTRACTOR. My mother took an equal pride in Len and in his setting out, and I heard her say once to a servant, in returning after a final wave of the hand from the gate along the semi-circular drive in front of the house in Vanbrugh Park, "Well, thank goodness, one of my sons is going to be a gentleman." Father used to tell her she was too fond of making friends of the servants, and she retorted that he should have thought of that before marrying her; when the bankruptcy came, and everything was sold and father escaped the last responsibilities, she said to Len and to me that our poor father's wisdom in marrying beneath him was now proved by the fact that she could turn her hand to nearly anything; she added that come what might, Len must go on with his schooling. More recently in Woodpecker Road (a branch of twelve-shillings-a-week houses

thrust out in the direction of market gardens, where bent women in red shawls were always making trenches for celery, or cultivating radishes, or the season's salads, and anticipating a later movement amongst their sex by smoking short black pipes) there, as I swept out the small crowded general shop, which had several smells, with paraffin oil beating all the others, I had the joy of seeing my elder brother go out at 8.20 on week-day mornings, walking rapidly along the back streets in the direction of the railway station. It always sent me off to school in good temper, telling myself that what Len was then, I would try, in course of time, to become.

I do not know whether it may be considered that my respect for Len requires explanation. It is not certain that you, yourself, would care to be called upon formally to give full and complete justification in any case of a somewhat similar nature. Speaking generally, one finds that most men keep two baskets, by means of which they are able to make a strict division between the people they like, and the people for whom they have no affection; in most cases the decision is made at the first encounter, made irrevocably. A man who discovers he has made a mistake and placed one in the wrong basket sometimes declines out of sheer pride to remedy the error; only occasionally will he own himself in error and adjust the blunder, so that those most successful in creating a good impression at the outset are likely to go into the favoured basket, and remain there. Friendship, so it seems to me, cannot be analysed or investigated; it exists, or it does not exist. In the case of Len and myself, affection started long before the period when I introduced him to you. My memories, and some of the best of them, went to a remote day, so far back as the moment always referred to by my mother in the words—

“When Henry here began to sit up and take notice.”

I should not like to make a guess at the age which coincided with recognition of Len, because it would probably sound incredible, but I declare I remember admiring him

from a cradle he had been ordered to rock, but from which excellent position he generously allowed me to remain awake and watch him as he imitated the magnificent drum-major of the Coldstream Guards. I can see him now, twirling a stick with fair success, strutting up and down the room, paper headgear similar to that worn by field marshals (to be turned later, by a magic twist, into a boat), and with closed lips buzzing a martial strain, relieved at times by the repeated ejaculation of—

“Oom-pah, oom-pah, oom-pah!”

Which I discovered later to be intended for the musical contribution of a trombone.

I must have made an admirable audience, ready to laugh on the least excuse, and never more diverted than, when tiring of other sports, he pretended to engage with me on a desperate prize fight, dancing near with clenched fists, giving tremendous and harmless blows, and sometimes affecting to be seriously injured, creating in me amusement that always ended in hiccoughs and a piece of sugar. Then, in the early days after Blackheath, when my mother's time was fully occupied in looking after the shop, and—as I have been told—a few of the old friends made a precise point of calling once, and once only, in order, apparently, that they might persuade themselves into believing they had not dropped the acquaintance suddenly—then, he was my nursemaid and took me out to taste the air of the market gardens in a perambulator, subsequently offered by my mother in a burst of generosity to a woman with innumerable children in Milton Court Road and by that lady—after close inspection of its many faults—definitely refused. (In its old age it became a conveyance for the delivery of parcels, compelling derision from errand boys who propelled cycle carts.) Len always contrived to make these outings agreeable to me, and I daresay he enjoyed the position of governor and guide. It was from his tuition that I learned to give an exaggerated title to most things; dogs were not bow-wows but lions, horses not gee-gees but elephants; the canal not acky



water but the Atlantic Ocean. Later, my brother proved the only person who assumed I had anything like normal intelligence. Until the age of five or six my mother kept rigidly to the use of baby language; I recollect the pleasing shock that came one night, when she ceased, in giving me the cue at prayers, to refer to the Almighty as Dod; here was a signal that it could at last be taken that my knowledge of the English tongue had advanced beyond the elementary stage. Long after this, customers were in the habit of saying if I happened to tumble—

“Oops—y—daisy!”

And going out of their way to strike the part of the floor against which I fell, a species of revenge that never gave me entire satisfaction.

But Len, so soon as I began to run about, and (I suppose) showed that everything which affected him was of deep interest to me, at once credited me with acumen I did not always possess, and continually paid me the great compliment of talking far above my head. He must have been amazingly quick and sharp with his lessons, for whereas, when it came to my turn, I had to be threatened, and cajoled, and denounced into doing educational work at home—always making the most elaborate preparations in order to fend off the moment for beginning the task—with Len it was something to be attacked without delay, something to be dealt with smartly, something to form, afterwards, a topic of conversation between us. He opened my young eyes to the distressing amount of information that had to be acquired before one could be counted fit to engage in a struggle with the world, and I remember, in regard to history, envying the boys who came into the world at an earlier period, say, soon after the landing of Julius Cæsar. At any rate, I obtained from Len a queer stew made up of fragments of information, so that when I did go to the Board School in Edward Street, I was able to astonish the young lady in whose class I found myself, by a sort of spasmodic erudition, behaving rather like a cheap firework on the fifth of November. Len helped me

with my lessons, when lessons came, and my reverence for him was such that when his statements conflicted with those made by the young woman in Edward Street, I, giving her the submission due to an official, had no doubt whatever in which quarter error existed. Also, for introduction to other boys I was indebted to Len. I think he must have needed a certain variety in his friendships, for it was at times difficult for me to keep pace with his changes, and I had to endure reproof for continuing to speak to Arthur Jessom and to borrow his hoop, after Len had decided that Arthur Jessom no longer lived ; with the few girls included in our circle, one had to be very wary, for the mere fact that Len spoke highly of the appearance and deportment of Mary Jane Partridge one day, was no guarantee that Miss Partridge, on the day following, would be counted worthy of the recognition which consisted in pulling undone the scarlet ribbon that adorned her plait of hair. In games, Len constituted himself my professional trainer, and I have always thought he would have done well at cricket, if only he had been able to keep temper under control.

I hope it will be seen how affection for my brother was planted, and how it grew.

The Blackheath days are rather vague in my memory, for I was sent away during the time of the sale, but I remember the men coming down to the house ; large, purple-faced individuals, with rare jokes to crack about certain articles of furniture, and over-anxious to show amiability to maid-servants ; the gummed labels which they produced suggested to me a Biblical reference which, somehow, did not seem appropriate to the situation, and "Lot 143" became the title of my rocking horse. I stayed with some people in Dover Road, who, to my distress, talked furtively and in whispers whilst I was present, giving me aggressive smiles of encouragement the while, but so soon as I was out of sight assumed that I was also out of hearing, and said so constantly—"What a come-down for the Drews !" that the remark became fixed into my little head as though it were the refrain of a comic song.

One large cart took the furniture bought in by my mother (mainly from the servants' room), and it called for me on a Monday night in January that, for another reason, is not likely to be forgotten by any Londoner alive at the time. It had been freezing hard all day, and muffled up with scarves and a borrowed shawl, I had been taken out to the pond on Blackheath to enjoy the best hour of sliding that has come within my experience. People said, looking upward, that there was a lot more to fall, and this to me sounded promising ; a long ride in such circumstances approached one's idea of perfection.

"Don't know so much about it," said the driver of the large cart, answering an assumed question. "If you ask me, my opinion is, you'd better not venture."

The Dover Road folk said I had been a good boy ; they were quite sorry to see me go, but they did not offer to extend hospitality, and my mother remarked that she scarcely knew what to do.

"Drive on!" ordered Len. He gave me a hand, I clambered up beside him, and he issued a further instruction.

"All very well to say Woodpecker Road," grumbled the driver, "but it won't be so easy to get there."

"I take the responsibility," said Len.

We exchanged farewells with my hosts, who could not conceal a look of relief as they turned to run indoors. It was fiercely, bitterly cold, and I allowed my mother to take me on her lap and protect me as well as she could from the biting air. Len slapped his shoulder in a manly way and began to manufacture a good stock of snowballs, some of which he fired at passengers who came out of the railway station ; their inability to discover the place the shots came from cheered us greatly, although my mother expressed the opinion that to knock off silk hats savoured of naughtiness likely to be punished, either in this world or in the world to come. The horse moved slowly, and Len from the tail of the van more than once shouted a direction that



the whip should be used, until the driver presently retorted with a pointed promise to adopt the suggestion, and a hint that the horse would certainly not be the object selected.

"Looks like winter," called out my mother, changing the subject.

"D'you know why that is?"

She shook her head.

"Because it is winter," replied the driver.

Down in Lewisham, near the Obelisk there could be no doubt about it. The snow was descending thickly and riotously; omnibuses discharged passengers who were told to walk home as best they could, and these began by floundering about in the great heaps that had drifted beside the pavement; the umbrellas they tried to put up were either wrested from numbed hands by the swirling wind, or turned inside out. It was certainly the maddest, the most irresponsible of snowstorms. We crouched back into the van as far as possible, but the flakes found us out, and Len shrieked with amusement at my mother's appearance; her crape bonnet had become the head-gear of a bride. Up Loampit Hill we found it impossible to move, and Len and I stepped down to assist the driver in encouraging the horse; I think the driver must have been a man of short temper, for he cuffed me on finding that my brother was making an endeavour to kick the animal. Everything about was perfectly quiet; the snow had the muffling effect of a thick white blanket, but now and again a slate came from the roof of a house and smashed into fragments. Near Lewisham Road station, when we had pushed our way there, we found a stationary four-wheeled cab with two lady passengers and a driver either inebriated or demented, and they implored that we should take them with us wherever we were going; their own objective was Sydenham.

What I recall principally about the journey was the vivacity of Len. Whenever there seemed a danger of depression making a clutch, the sight of some one else in deeper

misfortune cheered him, and I could not help thinking that anyone who could keep in good spirits during such an experience as this, was bound to make his way in the world. In New Cross Road the driver made an announcement.

"I'm done!" he said, definitely. "Can't go no further. If you take my advice, you'll try to make your way along somehow. The old 'orse and me, we've tried our best, and we can't do more! Only wish the pubs were open!"

We spent that night in the empty house down nearly at the end of Woodpecker Road, with no fire, and little to make a fire, but Len's spirits kept up, and kept us going. In the morning we found the shop doorway blocked high with snow; not a soul within hail, a weird and uncanny stillness about, and a good prospect of starvation. But for help that came later from a Mrs Croucher who lived near, we might all have died that day. My mother and I wanted to do something to repay her for the hot soup and the dry firewood and for her kindness, but Len decided it would be unwise to make friends impetuously; he, moreover, pointed out that virtue was its own reward, the woman ought to be grateful for the opportunity that had been offered to her. On the day after Black Tuesday, we started keeping shop.

Forgive this retrospection.

I gave my news about Mr Latham on the morning after the Rosherville trip, and Len declared it happened most fortunately; at office they were beginning to say he ought to wear a silk hat, and if mother could let him have the fourteen and six necessary for the purchase, he was prepared to hand down to me his week-day bowler. You may have assumed that my mother was of uncertain temper and snappish methods, but this would be an incorrect guess; it was only on Sundays and holidays that these were exhibited; on working days, the business of the shop and the house seemed to make her cheerful, and to the request she replied promptly, that she had been waiting for this occasion. Begging me to keep an eye on the shop door—we often had

early lady customers who ran in, not completely apparelled, with the prefaced remark of "Quite thought I'd got something for breakfast, but I find I'm wrong; may I trouble you?"—she went upstairs and brought down a leather hat-box, worn, in places, to a light brown, and produced from it a silk hat calling our special attention to names of the notable makers inside. This was none of your fourteen and sixpennies; father, so she informed us, never dreamt of giving less than twenty-five shillings. She wiped it carefully with a clean pocket-handkerchief and bidding Len to remain seated, placed it with caution upon his head, requested him to look at himself in the glass.

"Can't!" protested my brother. "It comes right down over my eyes."

"Fetch some cardboard, Henry," she said. "We'll remedy that in less than two ticks."

"Yes, but," when this had been done, "it's the wrong shape."

"It's the shape of a silk hat."

We explained that, whilst to the feminine mind it doubtless appeared that a man's hat was always a man's hat, yet each year brought some slight alteration, and to wear one which was not of the current fashion, was to give encouragement to gibes from boys in New Cross, to smiles of pity from fellow passengers in the 8.33 train; I myself, on an evening of the previous week had remarked to a youth, "Come out of that topper; I know you're there because I can see your legs!"

My mother, disappointed, took the leather box away, remarking that if the hat did not suit Len, it would have to be kept until I was old enough to wear it. Gave Len the amount he had mentioned, reminding him to ask for allowance of a discount, and the week-day bowler, that very evening, came into my possession, together with a pale blue necktie, and a pair of cuffs requiring adroit treatment with scissors. It was understood my services in the shop, night and morning, were to be continued, and on Len saying he supposed he



ought to share some of these duties, I was the first to declare that he would do nothing of the kind.

"You don't want to get your hands red," I remarked. "Once they get that colour, it takes a long time to get them white again."

I went in the evening after putting shutters up to call on my friend Ernest Fowler, in St Donatt's Road, and before going spent a good quarter of an hour at the sink with pumice stone and nail-brush. His young sister opened the door and looked at my hand before accepting it; my trouble was repaid by her smile of approval. Her father and mother called out to know who it was, and on Milly giving the information, they cried jovially "Bring him in, and make him have a bit of supper!" Ernest was out at a shorthand class, and this caused me to show reserve, for he should have told me he intended going in for study; if there was anything in friendship it ought to mean the complete absence of secrets. But the Fowlers were so cheerful, and the cold ham and watercress looked so good, that I could not keep back my news.

"Good business!" declared the father and mother. "Nothing like getting a fair start. Help yourself to mustard."

"Wish Ernest could have had the chance of something of the kind," I said, eating industriously. "Of course there are City clerks, and City clerks, but unless you get into a position like that of my brother Len——"

Milly glanced at the clock and held out her hand; her mother gave her a penny.

"Otherwise," I went on, "it's a monotonous occupation, and you soon become little better than a machine. Now at a place like Latham's, it's different. Anything may happen there. I shan't have to take my turn with eighty others."

"Isn't he rather an ignorant man?" asked Milly.

"That just gives me my opportunity."

Mr Fowler had heard of Mr Latham; knew a case illustrating his acuteness. Mr Fowler's company wanted to extend a station that could only be increased on one side; the

engineer's department kept the intention a profound mystery, to be known only inside official doors, and had its eye on a row of ten elderly, dilapidated cottages. When the department came to closer quarters to arrange with another department for the purchase, it was found Mr Latham had bought them quietly, two by two, had repapered them, white-washed them, given them an outward appearance of being fit for superior tenants. Mr Latham, at first, declined to sell, afterwards gave notice that he could be approached, eventually named a sum, and the company, without writing a cheque for the precise figure, nevertheless, as Mr Fowler expressed it, had to pay through the nose. I felt greatly pleased with this evidence of my firm's ingenuity and foresight. Ernest came in with his books, and congratulated me on the behaviour of Len in the river incident of Monday. Conversation went back to my coming duties.

"It's all as good as signed and settled," I remarked, "but I'm not quite sure what I ought to say when I call on him next week. Len says——"

Milly Fowler made a second mark on the back of an envelope.

"Len says I ought not to seem too eager. What are you up to?" I demanded, turning to her. "Foolish girl you are, to be sure. How can I talk without mentioning him?"

"Do you ever try?"

"What I was going to remark was that if any of you could give me some idea of what I ought to say, I shall feel very much obliged. Len would be the one to ask, but I don't want to seem to bother him."

They were good-natured over it, furnishing in generous quantities a variety of hints, but Milly's impersonation of a youth who touched his eyebrows respectfully with a forefinger at every sentence I rejected without hesitation. At the end I decided on a demeanour of jauntiness, with a blend of deference, not altogether easy to rehearse, but certain to come at the right moment.

In sketching out my future career I likely enough became

slightly patronising to the Fowlers, for Milly interrupted and suggested a game of cards. Mrs Fowler felt sure my mother would not be anxious seeing I had told her where I was going, and we played a game called "Manners," with the cards dealt out to each, the object being to get four of similar value. So that I, having three Jacks, had to say at random to one of the others, "May I trouble you for the Jack of Diamonds?" and if the person did not hold it, the answer was "Sorry!" with the right to make the next demand; if the card was handed over, then you had to be careful to say "Thank you, very much!" and nothing but "Thank you, very much!" otherwise the card was returned to the original owner and everybody knew you possessed some of the other Jacks. I should have done quite well, and I recollected the cards that had been asked for, but I could not remember to make the formal expression of gratitude. Milly said the game was an excellent one for those not practised in the art of good behaviour, and I admitted Len would not make blunders in playing it.

Unexpected trouble was waiting when I reached home at about half-past ten. Ernest Fowler walked with me half-way down Clifton Hill, and we had a spirited discussion on the subject of the attempted relief of Emin Pasha; Ernest was against H. M. Stanley and I stood up for him, and as Ernest had, only a few weeks previously, taken an exactly opposite view, I called him a weathercock, and he called me a brick wall. Flushed with argument, I found my mother with her apron over her mouth, standing at the corner of Liardet Street, looking anxious and distressed.

"Here I am!" I announced. "Hope you were not disturbed about me."

"Not about you, Henry. It's Len. Len isn't home yet. And it's his pay-day. If he's been knocked down and robbed, whatever shall we do?"

I made her go indoors and tried to comfort her, but she declared something dreadful must have happened; Len would have telegraphed if he had been delayed in Great Tower



Street; the alternative to an attack upon him was a railway accident. Events always came by threes, and there had been the river collision, and the acceptance from a stranger of a counterfeit sixpence. I ran up to the South-Eastern Station and ascertained nothing irregular had taken place; searched for Len in the compartments of the house opposite (he always had a glass of mulled claret on pay nights), but he was not there. Hurried anxiously down to Deptford Broadway, and there a shouted chorus from the windows of a working men's Club "If you want to know the time, ask a policeman," gave me an idea.

At the police-station a sergeant listened to the statement, with a calm which seemed to me inappropriate, and after dealing with some less important matters, gave me further attention.

"What height?" he asked.

"Couldn't say exactly. I know that he was nine stone eleven pounds four ounces not long ago."

"Do you expect me," demanded the sergeant, resting an elbow on the desk and pointing with his pen, "to tell my men to be on the look-out for some one weighing nine stone eleven pounds four ounces? I appeal to your common sense."

"He's rather fair," I went on, "and he has a small moustache, and there's a scar on his neck where a nurse once burnt him, and he's wearing——"

"Not so fast!"

"Wearing a mauve necktie."

"How do you spell that? Doesn't look right as I've got it down."

I gave him my view. Black morning coat and waiscoat. Grey trousers. Buttoned boots. And a silk hat.

"Oh," said the sergeant, changing manner, "a gentleman, is he? Thought you said he was your brother. How many days has he been——?" I explained. "Look here," tearing up the record irritably, "we can take a joke as well as anybody, but if you ain't out of this place before I count three, you'll be the one that's missing. Do you fancy we've got nothing

else to do but to worry ourselves about young chaps who don't come home till the last train? Be off with you!"

I tried to think of the reproaches my mother would be likely to make, and before returning went on to the hospital in Greenwich Road, where they kept me waiting so long, that I became terrified and eventually begged the porter to tell me the worst; he complied by admitting he had forgotten all about me—"There's such a little of you," he remarked genially—and assuring me that no one bearing Len's name, no one without a name, had been admitted that evening. At the railway station in New Cross Road the last train, I was told, would be due in a quarter of an hour, and I paced up and down Amersham Vale, waiting for the passengers to come out. When they did arrive, a jumble of officials off duty, hilarious young men, and women who seemed to have come straight from the stage without taking off their make-up, no Len was amongst them.

"Not found him?" cried my mother. "Henry, Henry, you haven't tried!"

I never have forgotten that night, and it is not likely I shall be able to do so now. Neither of us thought for a moment of going to bed; the lamp remained burning and we left the front door open that Len, arriving at any morning hour, should not decide, from consideration for us, to remain outside. I furnished comfort by suggesting he had probably reached Charing Cross just too late for the 12.15, in which case he would set out at once, over Hungerford Bridge, for the long walk. "By now he ought to be nearing the Elephant and Castle," I said. "He has only to go along New Kent Road, and then he'll be on the straight line down to the Gate!" Timing the journey with precision, at the moment when he should have neared Woodpecker Road, I ran out and called his name.

"We've lost him," moaned my mother, rocking herself. "We've lost our Len!"

In the morning I took his train, the 8.33; I had a great mind to go along the crowded platform, making

inquiries, but did not want to cheat myself of the luxury of a journey to town. Great Tower Street was found, and the offices of Messrs Penshurst & Hill, wine merchants, discovered, all with an ease that nearly made me forget my trouble; evidently the difficulties of making one's way in the City had been over-estimated. Mr Drew, the office lad told me, would, he supposed, be on the spot in about two seconds; but it would be a relief if he stayed away for once. I could sit, or stroll up and down outside. I accepted the second alternative for the sheer joy of watching the thick crowd of men surging along, with every doorway accepting some, every turn receiving a share.

"Out of the way," said the voice I wanted. "What, youngster? You here?"

I nearly stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "We've been so worried about you, Len. Wherever have you been?"

"Let me go in and sign on," he said. "I'll come out to you presently."

Len asked me to take home the money due to mother, less ten shillings, which he would pay to her as soon as possible. He offered a choice of three explanations, and gave me permission to select the one most likely to be accepted without incredulity. I can see him now, and the old-fashioned offices with wire gauze blinds and a bunch of wooden grapes over the doorway; a slightly tired look about the eyes (doubtless my appearance was not too fresh), a smile near his well-shaped mouth; he nodded to acquaintances as they went by, or gave them a friendly gesture that I resolved to imitate.

"Let me know what you tell her," he said, concluding, "soon as I reach home this evening. Thanks for taking so much trouble. Know your way back? You must come up with me one morning before you start work at Hatcham, and I'll show you round, and introduce you to some people. Tell the mater I'm all right."

The good fellow ran after me and gave me sixpence, three-pence of which I spent in going up the staircase of the Monument (three-hundred and forty-five steps; I counted



them), and from the high cage of iron at the top I looked out, and distributed to a party of country people a quantity of information, some of which may have been correct.

"Went to see some friends, Fulham way," I shouted in nearing the shop, "and they persuaded him to stay on. Anything ready to eat?"

"Thinking of nobody but yourself, Henry," she said, unable, in her joy, to put a tone of reproach in the words. "I only hope Providence won't punish you for it."

They compared times that evening, and finding I left Great Tower Street at twenty past nine, both reproved me for causing so much anxiety, and Len said he felt surprised I should occasion so much trouble; he hoped it would be a lesson to me in the future.

My mother's fervent aspiration concerning the kindly workings of Providence were not fulfilled. When, on the day fixed by Len, I called at Mr Latham's house and office in Hatcham, ready to embark at once on the serious business of life, and the control of advertising stations, that gentleman accorded me an audience, and I had no sooner begun to speak than he warned me that dependence must not be placed in the slightest degree on anything he happened to say when in what he called a cheerful condition. Mr Latham did not deny that on the steamer from Rosherville he might have given some sort of promise, or hint, or undertaking; all he wished to say was that his mind being a perfect blank so far as the early part of that voyage was concerned, he could only point out that drink was a curse, and we should be a great deal better off without it. Talking down my protests, he gave me a severe lecture on the advantage of total abstinence, the necessity of joining a Band of Hope in early years—

—"And sticking to it, mind. No use your signing the pledge and then going and breakin' of it the moment afterwards!"

—The misery I should cause to those around me if I continued on the path which led to destruction. As I went out, disconsolately, Kitty Latham from an open door caught my arm.

"Come in and keep me company for a little while," she pleaded. "Haven't spoken to a soul the whole day long. Sit down on this hassock and talk to me."

She listened to my grievance against her father, and declared it a shame, condoling very amiably and assuring me that everyone in this world encountered set-backs; called attention to a personal grievance in a tiny rash at the side of her mouth which refused to leave at the dictation of cold cream. Going over my own complainings again, I pointed out that valuable time had been wasted; here was I, no nearer to the start of work than a week ago; necessary to go back and tell my mother and, later, receive the comments made by Len. Len might say something not easy to forget.

"I'll talk him over," she promised. "I'll try to meet him as he comes out of the station, and have a chat with him about you."

"You don't know by what train he comes."

"Don't I?"

"It would certainly be a good idea for you to explain that it wasn't my fault."

"Course it wasn't baby's fault. Bless his heart. Poor ickle chap; he thought people meant what they said."

"So they ought," I snapped.

"They ought," agreed Kitty. "You're quite right there; but what people ought to do, and what people do do, are two very different things. You'll find that out, chickabiddy, when you get older."

"Leave my hand alone, stop ruffling my hair, and don't call me silly names."

"Was he in the tantrums then, and did he want to show off his paddy? He shall then. He shall give Kitty a good, hard slap."

I stopped her from taking my hand again, and backing to the mantelpiece, sulked.

"Won't tease any more, Henry," she promised, rising from the hassock and coming towards me. "Had an idea you could stand chaff."

"I can from some people."

"Len, for instance?"

"Len for instance. He knows how to do it, and when to do it. Besides, he's a man, or nearly. But you're only a girl. I won't have it from you. And what's more, I shan't be too ready to forgive your father for the trick he's played on me. Mind that!"

"This silly old spot on my face," she interrupted, looking in the mirror, "does annoy me so much. Just here, where I'm pointing. Come closer," she said, "and then you can see. Quite disfiguring, isn't it?"

"Nothing to bother about."

"What colour do you think my eyes are?" she asked.

"Never noticed."

"Well, notice now. Have a good look and tell me!"

"About the ordinary colour," I said.

"My mouth is considered the best part of my face."

"It's all right."

"Not better than that?" she asked, surprisedly.

"Oh, it serves its purpose, I suppose."

"Some one told me once it was like a Cupid's bow. Just trace it out with your finger, and give me your opinion."

I complied with her request, but excused myself from endorsing the comparison on the grounds that I had never encountered the instrument of warfare in question.

"Expect you're dying to give me a kiss, if the truth was known."

"You story-teller," I protested, indignantly. "Haven't the leastest desire to do such a thing."

"Let yourself out," she ordered curtly, pointing to the door. "Go back to your two-penny-halfpenny shop. You're the biggest duffer I've come across as yet!"

The depreciatory reference to Woodpecker Road struck me, in walking slowly home, as unfair. My mother and I took a certain pride in the establishment, and now that the chance of leaving had disappeared, I wanted to increase its importance.

We had a variety of methods of dealing with customers



and these I had learnt from the time when I was only old enough to sit on the counter and play with bundles of firewood, and, on anyone entering, scream—

“Shop!”

Away to the period when I took a more active part in the serving out of school hours, and began to escort and assist over-loaded women homewards, accepting the smallest coin as liberal reward, and listening politely to the giver's instructions concerning disbursement. There could have been few better opportunities for the improving of general knowledge, and I used to think sometimes that one acquired wider information in this way than was obtained at school; a good deal of it perhaps was not intended to reach my ears, but the ladies occasionally forgot to keep their voices down in communicating intimate facts across the counter, only discovering my presence too late.

“I'd really no idea, Mrs Drew, that your little boy—— Shouldn't have spoke so free if I'd known.”

“Doesn't matter,” said my mother, reassuringly. “He's too young to understand.”

Each customer was placed in a separate class, and dealt with accordingly. To some, an imitation of animosity was accorded at the moment they entered the shop, commencing with a brusque inquiry—

“Oh, and what have you came bothering about, I sh'd like to know! No work to do at home?”

—Thus striking the keynote of the conversation which ensued, so that a stranger happening to come in might have thought the two parties were on terms of the fiercest enmity; the customer deriding everything she saw or touched, and expressing grim incredulity concerning its fitness for human consumption; we, on our side, indicating doubt concerning the customer's ability to pay. Only the few, the chosen, were dealt with in this manner, for the temper had to be safe and well assured, with a perfect understanding between the parties playing in the comedy. The very demure, to take another set, relished best of all broad imputations on their

fidelity to husbands, and my mother proved exceedingly dexterous in playing upon this string.

"How are you and that young chap from Copestake's getting along?" she would demand of some sour-faced, elderly customer. "Your old man heard anything of your pretty behaviour yet? They're always the last to get the news, I believe."

"Takes a bit of artfulness," admitted the other; "but so far, there's been no open scandal. What I'm anxious about is that nothing shall get into the Sunday papers."

"Ah, well," with a sigh of tolerance, "youth will have its fling. Is a pound and two ounces too much, I wonder?"

Others again came for sympathy, and were not satisfied with anything but the genuine article. Lodgers tardy in settlement of weekly accounts, neighbours indulging in satirical remarks, husbands curt and reserved of manner, children guilty of the crime known as answering back, female relatives on the edge of foolish behaviour—all these matters were communicated under the seal of confidence, and my mother had, in addition to an admirable simulation of interest, a good assortment of comforting remarks.

"I wouldn't put up with it for another single, solitary moment, if I was you!"

"A worm will turn, Mrs What is it, and I think it's about time you did."

"The more you allow yourself to be down-trodden, the more you may. People reckon nothing the better of you because you don't assert yourself. You mustn't allow yourself to be sat upon!"

There were, too, frolicsome customers (mostly young married women), who brought anecdotes imported from town by husbands, and, in regard to these, my mother pretended an acute amusement which I am sure she did not feel, for her features went back to solemnity directly the light-hearted person, after telling the story once more, had departed.

I have since heard of rigid divisions existing in the society of military and dockyard towns, but nothing has ever been told to me that surpassed in intensity the sharply marked lines to be found near Woodpecker Road. Wives of railway signalmen, for instance. Their income was good, and, in many cases, they could afford to occupy an entire house without letting a room; in consequence they took up an attitude of haughty reserve, warning their children, under pains and penalties, not to exchange words with certain other children, and giving impressive and condescending support to the Wesleyan Chapel. Their daughters took music lessons, and sometimes opened the entertainment given in the Mission Hall, with a spirited duet wherein the girl who, by celerity and dodging corners, finished first waited, with a glance of triumph, for her slower and more conscientious sister. Wives of gentlemen engaged in the City, but not, if one might judge by their hats, in the foremost rank there, naturally kept themselves aloof from those whose husbands were employed in engineering works at Deptford, and when, at the end of the month, they were taken on a visit to the theatre, our shop was utilised as the exchange office for dissemination of news, for ladies not on speaking, or even frowning, terms with them were well inclined to hear what the play was about, how the ladies engaged in it were dressed, and receive an estimate of the age of the principal actress. Wives of clerks did take us, at rare moments, into something like society, and even Len could not be indifferent as the annual occurrence drew near when a lady in Milton Court Road was taken to a dance given by the firm, the invitation cards for which said "Evening Dress Indispensable," and whether she ought to go in low neck, or fastened severely up to the throat, was a question debated for weeks before the event, on either side of the counter.

We ourselves had triumphs, and these were always in connection with Len. Len once received a command to attend a fancy-dress Cinderella dance, and when customers had exhausted their stock of counsel—



"Don't you let him go, Mrs Drew. I wouldn't if he was a son of mine."

"If I was you, I should let him judge for himself. He's old enough by this time to know what's right, and what's wrong!"

—Then inquiries concerning the character Len proposed to adopt were fired at us, and our inability to give details was counted as reticence. Len ordered a hansom cab from the rank opposite the station, and before it came I helped to dress him in the Pierrot costume that he had succeeded in borrowing; it is doubtful whether any boy was so proud of any brother since the world began. He looked handsomer than ever, despite the necessary covering by an overcoat, as he walked through the shop, and I remember I ran after the cab a good mile just for the pleasure of being near to him. I remember, too, that when he came back an hour later with the information that owing to lack of patronage and consequently of funds, the orchestra refused to play and the dance had therefore been indefinitely postponed, it was I who burst into tears of disappointment and regret.

If I am not telling you too much of the little general shop which occupied such a large position in my early years, and now seemed likely to take a more considerable bulk in my life, I might remark on the considerable part taken by repetitions.

"Well, as I say, Mrs Drew, them that live the longest will see the most."

"That's right," agreed my mother. "Five-pence, twopence-halfpenny, a penny, and a penny-farthing; Henry, do you make nine three-farthings of that? Twopence-farthing change; I thank you."

"Yes," remarked the customer, placing the coppers in her purse. "People can argue what they like, but what I always say is, them that live the longest——"

"And what's more," interrupted my mother, dusting the counter, "it's perfectly true."

"They may talk till they're black in the face," continued

the customer, with a touch of violence, "but they won't alter my opinion, not if an angel from heaven came to back them up." Taking up her parcel, and retiring to the doorway, "You take it from me, Mrs Drew, and you can mention my name if you like, for what I say I'm prepared to stick to." Very deliberately, and with something of the manner of one who has just taken the oath, "Them that live the longest will see the most!"

It was understood between my mother and myself that our task consisted in applauding circumstances which existed, and by inuendo decrying the past. When Len, home from the City, swung through and, as one of us hurried to lift the flap of the counter, gave an ejaculation which intimated that his nerves of smell were offended, mother would, at the first convenient opportunity, deliver a brief eulogium on the general shop as compared with other establishments.

"Perhaps," conceded my mother, "likely enough, the American cheddar is a bit niffy this evening. These things vary. But what I want you to recognise is, that in a shop like ours we're not pinned down to one particular article. There's always a change. If you don't cotton to one, there's plenty of others to select from; only about half an hour ago—not so long, in fact—I was serving a quarter of a pound of currants to that very nice party who's apprenticing her son to the engineering, and the scent took me back till I forgot what I was doing, and I'm afraid she must have seen I wasn't paying proper attention to what she was saying, or understanding how long it had taken her to save up to give her boy a start. Took me back, it did—how many years ago shall we say?—to the time when you were about four and Henry here hadn't long come to town, and I was making a cake for your birthday, and your father came home early, in rare good spirits, over something lucky that had happened, and took me round the waist, and waltzed me, just as I was—floury hands and all—right round the kitchen. A wonderful man when he was in good spirits. You remind me so much of him at times, Len. I see a great resemblance."

"Hope I shan't make quite such a bungle of my life as he did of his."

"Going back to the question of the shop," she went on, now addressing me, "I think you ought to have the intelligence, Henry, to see, considering how old you are, that there's something rather fine in being able to serve nearly everybody that steps foot over the sill. Why, I was in an ironmonger's the other afternoon down in Deptford Broadway, and in come a young woman, asking for a reel of black cotton. Of course," triumphantly, "they were done. All they could say was that they were very sorry, and recommend a draper's in the High Street. Now, with a general shop such as ours, you stand behind the counter and you feel that you're monarch of all—— How does that go?"

I supplied the quotation.

"None to dispute," she repeated, with a touch of doubt. "Of course, arguments will arise, but I find that if you haven't got in stock exactly what they want, you can easily persuade them to take the next best, by suggesting they should wait a day or two. Nothing makes 'em so impatient as to recommend patience. And then see how one thing leads to another. A lady comes in for a bar of yellow soap, and if we kept nothing else but yellow soap, she'd take it, and pay, and go, and there would be an end of it. But you talk to her about the wear and tear of washing day, and the necessity of keeping body and soul together, and that reminds her she's out of bacon, and she isn't absolutely certain that there's an egg left in the basin. You go from eggs to milk, from milk to cream, and you show her one of the little brown pots, and mention that lady customers who were brought up in Devonshire have spoken well of the article. The bar of yellow soap," concluded my mother triumphantly, "is only a kind of foundation stone, and anything you like—or rather anything you get the other party to like—can be built on top of it. Isn't that so, Henry?"

"Have known it happen."



"It's most satisfactory," said Len, finishing his supper, "to find that you two have a congenial occupation. Brush my hat, mother, and, Henry, just give my patent boots a rub over."

"Going out again this evening, my dear? Why not stay in and have a game of draughts with your brother?"

I glanced at him hopefully.

"Nothing I should like better," he answered, "but I have an engagement."

My mother never contested when this phrase was used, and I am sure she found a real gratification in repeating it; even the woman whose son was going into the engineering trade and plumed herself greatly on the circumstance, had to bow before the words when they came in answer to the casual inquiry, "And where's your eldest, Mrs Drew, if it isn't a rude question?" My mother had a shiver of pride in furnishing the information that he was not at present indoors, and in giving the reason.

It was this woman's son who gave me, after the Latham incident, some of the black moments that jealousy can create. I happened to be going through the phase that comes once, or more often, to every boy, when his heart's desire is an occupation that excuses grubby hands and murky features. Lads went by of an evening, returning home from the works in question, magnificent in greasy clothes, carrying a blue tin can, and their faces smirched as though they had half determined to join the Moore and Burgess Minstrels. I envied them, and I envied his prospects. The mother had been saving up since the loss of her husband, and in school days I had been compelled to punch his head for declaring he intended to take up occupation in the works where his father was killed; the truth being, I suppose, that no other repartee occurred to me. He called round to see me on the night before commencing duty, and we walked up Clifton Hill together; I remember warning him—in the manner of one who knew the world inside and out—that nothing ever came up to one's expectations, and that the great trick was to under

estimate rather than exaggerate possibilities of the future. We wrangled a good deal at the top of the hill near to one of Latham's advertising stations, and became so heated that we parted in a huff, and I walked home, continuing my side of the discussion in an undertone to myself, not greatly helped by the discovery that the most valuable arguments occurred to me too late to be of effective use. The next morning, his delighted mother called twice; once to inform us that he had left for his first day at the works; later to give a sketch of the great times they would have together when he began to earn wages. My mother, noting the sulkiness that enveloped me, spoke of the risks of marriage open to youth in receipt of a good income, but the caller declared, confidently, that she was ready to bet a halfpenny that no girl would ever get hold of her boy. She had increased the amount to a penny when two men, who looked defiant, but it appeared, intended to look sympathetic, came to the doorway.

"Partly his own fault, ma'am, mind you. He'd no business to be meddling with the machine. No," answering her screamed appeal, "no. You can't see him. The poor kid ain't a sight for anybody, let alone his own mother."

The incident caused me to feel less dissatisfied with the general shop in Woodpecker Road.

### CHAPTER III

#### LEN IN THE EIGHT THIRTY-THREE

THE severest trial that came as a consequence of Mr Latham's defection was in the open amusement of my former colleagues at the Board School. In a wage-earning district like to that on the slopes north of New Cross Road, the usual thing was for a boy to leave on Friday and begin work the following Monday, with mothers perceptibly brightened at the thought of useful shillings a week added to the weekly income, and making plans for an afternoon of shopping in Rye Lane, Peckham. Here was I submitting to an interval (eating my head off, as Mrs Croucher phrased it), during which no child was too small to ask, "Got a job of work yet, Henery?" and when they came in groups and saw me standing in the shop doorway, they gave a few lines of a dirge sung by unemployed men during the previous winter; in ordinary circumstances verbal retorts might have been made to crush these attacks, but my voice was breaking and its irregular notes, high and low, lent themselves easily to ridicule. Mrs Croucher, who had the right to come into the shop at any time, emphasised my desolate outlook by declaring that the Has Beens, amongst whom she numbered us, never regained their former position, and discovered a paragraph in a Sunday newspaper which gave a statement of some medical expert to the effect that Londoners, after three generations, became extinct. Mrs Croucher had a regard for my mother, looking upon her as one with the rare experience of stepping up into society and returning after a pleasing interval, to something below the first position; she often brought other women in of an afternoon to make small purchases, and with bare elbows resting on the high



counter, they listened eagerly whilst Mrs Croucher put my mother through an examination in chief regarding life in a large house at Blackheath, glancing now and again at the audience when some astonishing detail had been elicited, with a proud

“What d’you think of that now?”

Or,

“Isn’t that exactly, word for word, what I told you?”

A stormy, tempestuous incident occurred at about this time that reflected little praise to me, but a good deal of credit upon Len. I hope there existed a better reason for my conduct than I can discover after this lapse of time.

Tyson was the primary cause of all the trouble, and even now I cannot think of the man with anything like amiable feelings; he made me suffer too deeply. He had the great good fortune to lose a leg at Spa Road Station, and the only topic on which he could speak intelligently consisted of a description of the whole affair from start to end; the recital took three-quarters of an hour, beginning with the exact quantity of refreshment imbibed before taking his ticket, ending with the final letter from the railway company, offering a sum without prejudice. “And now,” concluding, “now you know as much about it as what I do!” After hearing the account some twenty times, the man’s deliberation and exactitude touched my nerves, and I started on the game of hating Tyson. It was to be a fight to a finish; either Tyson or I would have to admit defeat; one of us was to go down in the corner, and confess himself unable to continue. He called himself an Insurance Agent, and a small brass plate to this effect was screwed to the railings of the house where he lived in Amersham Vale, but the sum obtained for the loss of a limb enabled him to relinquish the perfunctory occupation, and his habit was to get out of bed at twelve o’clock midday. “Never a minute earlier; never a moment later,” he used to say, proudly. He always hailed me with—

“Here comes little twopence-three-farthings!”

A remark which in its early days might possibly have con-

tained some elements of humour, but these had been, by constant repetition, worn away. His further conversation went on regular lines, and the broadness of his hints concerning a cup of tea never varied. He did perform one useful service in providing a butt for lady customers, who arriving, would assume he was one of the articles provided by the general shop, and ask for a pound of Tyson, or—this struck me as a clever touch—a bundle of firewood of the Tyson brand. Recognising him, they apologised, and mentioned that a girl of their acquaintance was wishful to get married, and had no objection to a husband who was half a man and half a tree. His great joke at my expense was to suddenly stick out his wooden leg as I hurried through, and trip me up.

My dislike became more profound on overhearing two women discussing him one evening. Tyson, they said, was making up to Mrs Drew; a hard-working widow, not bad looking when you took everything into consideration, and with only a couple of boys—one nearly able to keep himself—would just about suit the old humbug. This alarmed me. I spoke about it to my mother and she answered, amusedly, that people would scandalise about something; a good thing they could find nothing more serious.

“I’m going to tell him to leave off coming here,” I said.

“You’re to do nothing of the kind, Henry.”

“Why not?”

“Because I forbid you to. That’s why.”

Tyson, closely watched by me, proved to be exhibiting some of the curious effects created by love. He sat, as usual, on a sugar box in the corner of the shop, but no longer related the details of Spa Road accident; omitted to give me the salutation. Instead, allowed his eyes to wander sheepishly about the floor, and on discovering a pin or a wisp of straw, he descended, carefully removed the obstruction, and went back, with the relieved sigh of one who has performed a good day’s work. Also, he adopted a trick of humming quietly to himself which I found irritating in the

highest degree ; it is likely that anything he had done would have provoked equal annoyance on my part. Because he refrained from mentioning that tea, taken in due moderation, could be looked upon as a refreshing beverage, my mother brought him at five o'clock a cup, into which he blew furiously and lifting it said—

“ Well, ma'am, here's another thousin' a year to all of us ! ”

And thereupon sipped noisily.

I knew that if I spoke to Len about it, he would only reprove me for stupidity, and as Tyson was always careful to leave on the stroke of seven, my brother knew nothing of the visits. Meanwhile, Tyson became to me a perfect nightmare. He might have been toothache, or a tipsy wife, or a foolish speculation, from the complete way he had of filling all one's thoughts. Tyson was in my mind as I went to sleep, the leg of a chair in the bedroom recalled him to me as I opened my eyes. The sound of his one footstep, alternating with the tap of his artificial limb, made the blood rush to my head, and I could not pretend to hold myself under control. I spoke to three lads of my acquaintance, and they agreed with me the case was serious, that something had to be done ; promised to assist in any way I cared to indicate. On the night and at the hour when we were to seize him as he came out of the shop, and run him down to the canal, the three unfortunately had engagements of an urgent nature which prevented them from arriving.

This failure on the part of friends sent me into the deepest depths of gloom and recklessness. I determined that, the situation having become intolerable, I had the right, at any rate so far as I was concerned, to terminate it at all costs. On the following evening when I arrived, tired after delivering parcels, Tyson was there and, this time, if you please, smoking a pipe, an act which seemed the last possibility of insolence. I did one or two tasks suggested by my mother, then privately scooped out the contents of the money bowls and filled my pockets with small silver, and coppers that included a number of farthings, (I think I must have



had some idea that I was securing my birthright, or something of the kind). With a look at Tyson that should have been fatal to the superfluous man, I strode out.

"Where are you going?" asked Len's voice, between two dim gas-lamps.

"Len," I blurted out, "I—I'm going away. I can't stand it any longer. I've left without saying good-bye to mother, but I'm glad of the chance of saying good-bye to you. Wish me luck, please!"

He took me by the shoulder, and gave me a shaking that made every coin in the pockets rattle; then, holding my arm, forced me to return. At the doorway of the shop, he released me and gave a warning glance I dared not disobey.

"That your definite and what I may term final answer, Mrs Drew?" Tyson, coming out, was asking.

"Definite and final," replied my mother.

"All I can say is, you're a very silly woman."

"All I can say is, you're an uncommonly stupid man."

He begged pardon for his clumsiness in stumbling against us, and went off growling a threat to never re-enter the shop. Len ordered me to put the money back, and to come upstairs.

"Want you to mend my skates for me," he said. "You're a handy little chap to have about the place."

Len was very good to me through all this time, and he once allowed me to walk up to Bricklayers Arms goods station in Old Kent Road, enter on some pretext, and make mental note of several addresses on cases that bore the word Glass, the instructions This Side Up, and a drawing of a bottle; he gave me for these a penny each, and I, although wet through, counted the money easily earned. Also, he handed over, at various times, more wearing apparel, and I took a new interest in every tailoring purchase he made; it was not his fault that the articles which fitted him excellently proved too commodious in every direction for me. Fortunately it was a rainy summer, and trousers could be turned at the ankles without creating surprise.

One thing, quite clear and indisputable, helping us enormously, consisted in the fact that Len was the first gentleman of New Cross; of, at any rate, the streets on the London side of the main road. We found it amusing to observe the efforts of other young blades to compete, to note the discouragements encountered, and their last struggles to keep in line with him. It was a time when experiments were being made in the shape of bowler hats, and on Len appearing with some novelty in head-gear, half a dozen made a frantic rush to secure hats of similar appearance; in their haste they occasionally paid insufficient attention to the size, and strutted about either with one that came down to the ears, or perched riskily at the very top of their head. In neck-ties, nobody disputed his lead, and I shall never forget our great triumph when he obtained from a French clerk at his office one of those spacious butterfly ties, blue with white spots, and the competitors found themselves unable to purchase anything that, excepting at a long interval, resembled it. With regard to fancy waistcoats, reserve and caution were exhibited until Len had proclaimed his choice, and then the imitations came swiftly. I wanted him to go out one evening in a tarpaulin suit with a nor' wester hat—which I could have borrowed from a man working on the canal—just to see how many youths would display themselves on the next rainy evening, similarly attired, but Len took the question of clothes seriously.

"The low comedy part in the family, I can leave in your hands," he remarked.

"You'd do it better than I should, Len. You'd do every thing better."

"Almost everything," he corrected.

Occasionally a new arrival came to the district, a junior clerk in lodgings with an allowance from parents in the country to add to his monthly wage, and he, hearing of Len's reputation, set about to surpass my brother. What generally happened in a case of this kind was that mere extravagance took the place of discretion, or that the fine

feathers had the result of attracting him into an early engagement and marriage with some female bird ; wedded life, in our neighbourhood, always meant that the husband thenceforth relied exclusively on the wardrobe accumulated in bachelor days, and as the years went on, so he receded from fashion. A good many of Len's contemporaries made spirited essays on small incomes, but they never succeeded in clothing themselves completely in one period ; a garment or more belonged to the previous year, and by the time these were replaced by something new and in the note of the season, other details had fallen behind, hopelessly distant. For myself, I was of course never in the fore-front, but I had a special reason for looking after Len's clothes, seeing they were well brushed, hanging coats on supports, arranging that trousers should have the precise line at the right place, and pointing out to my mother any necessity for slight repair ; I never knew how to thank him sufficiently when, at moments for revision, he said—

“You can have this if you like. I've done with it.”

For then, so soon as he had gone out, I was able to put the garment on, and exhibit myself, obeying my mother's instructions to walk across the room, and trying to accept in the sense intended, her enthusiastic assurance that she had never seen such a fit in all her life.

The infatuation of certain young women for Len was natural enough. Invitations to parties came during the party months, addressed particularly and specially to him, and in replying to these, he would sometimes at my earnest request, mention that I was willing to take his place ; now and again the inviter had the strength of mind to answer, in so many words, that my presence was unnecessary, but I did frequently discover myself acting as his understudy, only to be badgered throughout the evening by inquiries concerning Len, and by endeavours to ascertain whether truth was included in the excuse he had made. The girls wrote to him on coloured note-paper—heliotrope for choice—with a small flower at the corner of the envelope ; the



whole so fiercely scented that when the postman made the delivery, odours of our shop retreated. My mother, seeing one or two young women waiting about on the opposite side of the way at about the hour when he usually returned home, would go to the doorway, and say loudly (to my great confusion)—

“Henry! Looks as though some one wants to see you.”

Whereupon they took to their heels.

With every desire to recall satisfactory incidents, I cannot remember any special attention being paid to me by these ladies for my own sake. In pairs, they would give me their company on the way from Sunday evening service, talking rapidly, and there were times when I thought I had made a good impression, until glancing back after they left, I observed them doubled up with amusement, and, more than once, I heard the remark, “Isn’t he a little fool!” Alone, it was easy to talk with considerable fluency, inventing remarks and giving appropriate repartees, but with me, good acting was noticeable only during rehearsals. With Len, it was the exact opposite. I heard him on the rare occasions, when he permitted himself to talk with members of the opposite sex, rapping out the correct, if unexpected answer; affecting to misunderstand their questions, and making great play of this; always leaving them with some adroit remark. A great gift; it used to strike me that nature, in making distribution, showed extraordinary partiality, but I felt honestly glad that Len had been specially selected. And I hope I am placing sufficient emphasis on all the joy that came to us out of our pride in him during these days.

Childhoods differ, I suppose, but one cannot help thinking that the rapture exhibited by some in speaking of their early days is due, in some part, to failure of memory. For myself, I cannot select any months of my later life that I would care to exchange for those spent immediately after leaving school. When nearly everything in the shape of disaster had been piled upon me, toothache jumped to a seat on top, and I

used to rise early of a morning, and quietly, for fear of disturbing Len ; take a sharp walk down over the canal bridge, under the railway viaduct, past the soap works to St Helena Gardens and back, in order to distract thoughts from the acute pain ; my mother took every lady customer's advice, and tried their certain and unfailing remedies upon me, making the nerve more sensitive at each experiment. Before making up my mind to dress and go out, I lay there wide awake, envying Len the possession of a peaceful mind, and seeing my own future with increasing plainness. Fate, it was obvious, marked some as favourites, and I had not been selected ; this meant that I should go down and down. A disreputable old man known as The Cadger came round the streets of the neighbourhood, always stopping to turn over heaps lying near the pavement and swearing horribly to himself at conclusion of the search ; folk said he was worth untold gold, and this circumstance made the only difference between my future and his present years. The Cadger lived near the railway arches at Deptford, and I followed him home one night, and with a small gift endeavoured to obtain particulars of his early life, in order to confirm some of my dismal suspicions, but, between his imprecations, one could only gather that if he now encountered any of his relatives, he would murder them individually or collectively, which task accomplished, he would strangle me for daring to interfere with the quietude of a peaceable man who, if only he found enough tobacco and sufficient beer, asked no more of the world. I ventured to ask whether he had ever had enough beer, and the Cadger answered this happened only once, in December of '82 ; he added that, unless I decided to cut off home at once and stop badgering, he might reconsider the order of killing, and set about me.

My mother, accepting the next morning a letter from the postman, insisted upon arguing the matter of re-direction with him, and when he protested, declared he ought, by rights, to know by whom it had been sent on from the old Blackheath address.

"If you don't," she remarked, triumphantly, "who should?"

Rejecting my advice, she decided not to open the envelope but to allow it to remain untouched until Len returned from office at night; a promise was, however, given that I should have the foreign stamp, providing Len did not require it. Meanwhile, we both speculated regarding the contents, and it was over the tea-table that my mother announced suddenly that it must be from one Henry, favourite cousin of my father's and a relative whose Christian name had, it appeared, suggested mine. After that it became difficult for both of us to exercise patience, and at half-past six—the counsel of two lady customers having been sought and obtained—my mother took the resolute course suggested by me some hours previously.

"This can never be!" she cried, when she had come to the end.

I was reading it aloud, my mother checking the sentences, and the two customers leaning interestedly and open-mouthed across the counter, when Len came in with his usual quick alert manner and snatching up the envelope demanded sharply who had been opening a letter addressed to him; the two ladies went hurriedly remarking that they would look in again, later.

"It's meant for your poor father, Len dear."

"Give me the letter."

He announced, after reading, that he would see to it; charged us to speak no word of the contents to anyone in the neighbourhood. The great thing to avoid, in a matter of the kind, was bungling, and Len did not conceal his suspicion that our capabilities in this regard had no definite limit. The relative would, it appeared, not arrive home from China for a month and there existed no occasion for hurry; we were to leave the matter to him, and he guaranteed that it would be dealt with in a wise, diplomatic way. These elderly men who had been away from England for a number of years and were out of touch with civilization, had to be



handled carefully; Len's view was that we should on no account, at first, exhibit our poverty, but that we should meet him on terms of equality; later, he was to be allowed to find the truth, and his purse would then be affected by the discovery. Mother, with great respect, urged the advantages of truth, but I sided with Len. Few things, in my opinion, were so likely to impress the old fellow from China as an attitude of proud reserve; an indication of not asking for assistance.

Nothing, however, could prevent us from speculating on the future, a game in which ladies of the neighbourhood joined with something exceeding ordinary enthusiasm, something that came perilously near to extravagance; it would not be easy to quote the sum which the fortune eventually reached in the buoyant estimate of Woodpecker Road, and I am sure many found a kind of reflected success in the incident, for they spent a great deal more money than usual at the shop; the stock of several articles had to be increased, and travellers who called took a cheerful air, speaking of a precedent to be found in Westbourne Grove, where one small shop had grown into twenty and the name of the proprietor had become known throughout the world. My mother gently reproved everyone for optimistic views, but I have no doubt that those she herself held were equally sanguine. Len gave an order, after being carefully measured, at a tailor's in Cornhill, which meant that I had a fair prospect of impressing Milly Fowler and her people by a smarter appearance; I hoped my contemporaries would not be too severe in their comments on my first walk out in a tail coat. Len's clothes, as I have said, nearly fitted me, but there did exist a margin which betrayed the fact that they had not come direct from the tailor into my possession. Len told me at night that if the relative wanted to take him back to China, a swift answer would be given to the proposition. Len was willing to accept help, for help would, at the moment, be useful, but London had the first claim upon his services, and London was the place where he intended to make a name.

As for myself, I felt that for me the curtain was now going up. What would happen, it was not within my powers of imagination to decide, but I could foresee that instead of the slow, laborious years hitherto expected, an instant change was to be made by means of the fairy wand that was on its way from China. I was able to show on my old school atlas the point which the steamer had now reached, and from comments made, it appeared certain that, for the first time, my mother threw away incredulity in regard to the existence of distant countries, although she could not understand why the ground in some was red, in some yellow, in others brown. We both took up, in the shop, an attitude of less servility, and if customers, on finding we did not possess an article they wanted, and that we gave no assurance we should have it in the following week, threatened to go to Deptford, we gave a short cough intended to convey complete indifference. A few warned us not to think ourselves everybody, but this caution had no effect.

"Henry," said my mother, with solemnity, "we can afford to laugh now."

I wanted to accompany Len, but he decided I should be in the way, and he alone took charge of the task of meeting the steamer at the docks, and entertaining the relative.

Throughout the day we could make no successful attempt to hide restlessness; my mother fixed her new lace cap with a touch of violet in it—

"Half mourning," she explained.

—Soon after the midday meal. It was just five o'clock when I was able, being on the look-out, to announce that Len had turned the corner, and (better still) that he was not alone; this was a surprise, for the idea had been that there should be a meeting in London later on, after Len had paved the way.

"I should have known you," cried the old gentleman, "known you if I'd met you in the street."

"You've not altered," asserted my mother, "much."

"Oh yes, I am. I've been looking at myself in the mirror a good deal on the way home, and I can see a lot of difference to what I was years ago on the journey out."

We took him to the back room; Len, to my astonishment, folded arms and stood silently in the corner.

"This is the one, then, named after me, is it?" He put on spectacles, regarded me, and gave an "Ah!" that might have meant anything. "He's rather like my fourth."

"Your fourth what?" asked my mother.

"My fourth boy. Perhaps you didn't know I was married. This other one of yours, he talked so much, I didn't get a chance of speaking until just now as we were coming along from the station. I insisted on coming down to see you, because I've got to be off to Germany the day after to-morrow. Oh yes, bless you, we've got ten or eleven children; upon my word, I couldn't tell you the exact number without putting their names down on a piece of paper. And as I've been telling the other one, it costs me about every penny I earn to bring 'em up. Well, how are you, after all this time? Sorry to hear about your loss. To tell you the truth, I hoped to borrow a bit from him."

He gave me, before leaving, one and sixpence, and told me to make it last a year.

On a Monday, when we had only taken eightpence half-penny at the shop—a few other callers applied for change and children had come asking for the date, and a lady tried to make me buy a church magazine—I walked determinedly and biting my underlip to meet Len at the station. Allowed him, of course, to say good-bye to his friends before speaking; they, after pressing him to accept cigars and cigarettes, went up Amersham Road, parting from him with a regret that one could easily understand.

"What you doing here, youngster?" he asked, taking my  
arm.



"Len," almost crying, "I want you to help me. Will you help me? Will you give me your word?"

"Little man," he said, as he walked by the shops, "you're exaggerating your small troubles. Take an example by me, and never worry about things that don't matter."

"I'm willing to take an example by you, Len, but I'm not getting a chance. If only I could get a start, I should be all right."

"It isn't only the first step that counts."

"Can't do anything until I get the first step."

"I'm having to dash round now," he went on, "and I can tell you that if you think you have all the troubles in the world, you're mistaken. You just stay on and help with the shop, and something is certain to turn up. Particularly want you to stick to mother."

"I promise to do that."

"Because," tapping the ash from his cigar, and speaking carefully, "I find it rather tiresome to run the continual risk of my friends discovering where I live. I've told them, when they asked me, nearly every place but Woodpecker Road, and it's so difficult to remember in case they ask twice. So, later on, I shall want you to help me to get away, and set up in diggings of my own."

"I'll do that," feeling, all the same, rather choked in the throat at this prospect, "if you give me a hand now."

"Let me see!" After a few moments of thought. "How would you care to come into our show as office boy?"

Nearly dancing on the pavement near the Wesleyan Chapel, I assured Len it was exactly what I should prefer of all things. How long had there been a vacancy? My spirits went down when he told me there was no vacancy at present; they went up again when he said it could be easily arranged.

"I'll take you up with me in the morning," he promised,

"if you can smarten yourself, and look a bit more like Great Tower Street, and a good deal less like Woodpecker Road. Where are you going?"

"Why," I said, "up to the Fowlers, of course, to tell them all about your kindness."

"You might mention it to your friend Kitty Latham, too, if you get the chance. Say something pleasant about me."

This would have been done that very evening, but when I explained to Mrs Fowler the reason why they had seen nothing of me for some time past, and Ernest had given me his latest views on Home Rule for Ireland, and I announced there was another call to make, Milly took me aside and said would I mind staying on to talk to mother whilst she herself went to Pyne's; my good temper enabled me to say that I could easily write to Hatcham and come along with her to Lewisham High Road, which amendment she accepted, dictating the letter and providing the stamp for the envelope.

It would not be easy to say how many times we walked between the draper's shop and St Donatt's Road; the repetitions were to be blamed to me, for each time I discovered something more to say and begged her to turn just once again. When I did at last give her back at her house, we had to submit to the reproaches of the family. Ernest, who might surely have held his tongue, declared that one of the most painful sights of the neighbourhood was the spectacle of young couples, scarcely more than children, promenading the main streets. My heart was light enough to permit me to smile at the comments; their blame made Milly and myself stand shoulder to shoulder. That evening, for the first time, I, in shaking hands with her, discovered she gave a gentle grip that was rather pleasing.

My mother had the new experience the following morning of saying good-bye to her two sons simultaneously; she called me back to kiss and wish me luck, and give a last touch to my hair with the comb. Len, who had a third-class

quarterly season-ticket, was about to take a third return for me at the booking-office, but I, seeing in this something that might tempt Providence, begged him to ask for a single; I could easily walk back.

"You do want exercise," he admitted, as we went down the staircase to the platform. "You're just the age when you ought to be hardening your muscles. I need comfort. Soon as I can afford it, I mean to go in for a second-class season."

"Look here, Len," I said, impulsively, "you get this berth for me, and I'll hand over what my ticket would cost and walk to and fro instead of riding, and then you'll be able to do as you want."

"I was going to suggest that."

"Very glad I was the first to mention it."

With all the admiration felt for my brother, I think one never properly realised his wonderful qualities until that journey by the 8.33. A slight fog met us on the platform, and a statement came that it was thicker up the line. Len made his way through the crowd to the bookstall, bought a morning journal for himself and a picture paper for me. The train came in carefully.

"Stick close to me."

"Right you are, Len."

We raced up to the end of the platform and there found a third-class compartment empty but for two youths playing Nap on a spread-out *Daily Telegraph*; half a dozen followed us, and Len sitting next the door managed to hold it on the inside, preventing others from entering, and condoling with them on their inability to force it open. The train started, leaving a good many on the platform. I felt especially glad to find my friend Ernest Fowler opposite; he was scanning the leading article in his journal before applying himself to the news. The train stopped so soon as it neared the first signal box, and someone made a caustic remark concerning Sir Edward Watkin; conversation became almost general.



The thing which struck me about the behaviour of Len was that he allowed the rest to express their views, and only came into the discussion when urgently invited. I wanted to contradict when the task seemed easy, but he restrained me, and I imitated him in listening with an air of deference. Since then I have heard weaker arguments used in second-class carriages, and, in first-class, contentions still more feeble, but at the time the debaters seemed to me to be talking below my head; I wondered how an intelligent man like my brother could sit there without protesting. Ernest Fowler's manner, I knew, and when, leaning forward, he advised me to buy a different journal on each morning of the week—

"So as to get an all round view of affairs," he whispered, confidentially.

Then I understood and could pardon him. Ernest prefaced his remarks with "Thinking it out, it seems to me that——" and gave a quotation so far as memory permitted from the journal he held in his hand; others in the compartment (including the Nap players, whose game stopped because one had lost the maximum of threepence) gave views obviously their own individual property. Struggles were going on amongst dock labourers; a railway strike existed in Scotland; London postmen gave signs of mutiny; a battalion of The Guards had to be sent to the Bermudas. These incidents afforded a good, wide field for contention, and some excellent verbal manoeuvring should, in my opinion, have taken place.

"Tell them what you think, Len," I whispered.

"Presently!"

We stopped at signals and between signals, with a loud report exploding occasionally beneath our wheels, causing me to jump and giving the rest excuse for laughing at my alarm. Not until we passed Spa Road, and it seemed likely we should get a clear run into London Bridge Station, did Len speak, and the rest having by this time exhausted their small stock of opinions, he was able to talk without interruption,

excepting from the person addressed, who tried to interject with—

“Ah, but——”

And

“Pardon me, but what I said was——”

The others insisting upon silence and demanding attention for Len. “You’ve had your say; now let him have his!” My brother simply bowled them over as though he were playing at nine-pins. The floor of the carriage became strewn with shattered arguments. I remember he was particularly caustic in dealing with one of the Nap players, who had pleaded that men who could only fetch and carry should, because of their disabilities, be treated with consideration; he finished by giving his own views concerning machinery, taking the whole question of the displacement of labour out of the mist of words in which it had become involved. It was really wonderful. I watched his eyes as he talked; made a note of one of his emphatic gestures; envied the gift of easy flow of words that could never be mine. Also, I observed with exultation the restless movements of the man with whom he happened to be dealing, the feeble attempts at indifference, the unsuccessful endeavours to smile, the involuntary frown which came when a sharp thrust was experienced; apprehension was exhibited by the next person on the list, and bitter complaints made of the slowness of the journey. As the train went carefully into London Bridge Station they gave a concerted sigh of relief.

“Not every morning!” Len replied, as we went through the fog in the Approach. “Did it this time to show off in front of you. Keep your handkerchief over your mouth, little man.”

Left alone I should have found myself when the sun managed to pierce through, at Dockhead or East Smithfield, or somewhere more distant; only by preserving a tight hold of his coat did I manage to keep fear away. The river was full of fog up to the edge of the parapet,

and in the roadway drivers walked with lanterns at their horses' heads, but Len pushed his way along, knew the right turning when we had finished with the bridge, snatched me out of the way of a lumbering fish trolley, and brought me up safely at the door of Penshurst & Hill's at a moment when I began to feel certain we had gone miles beyond the place.

"Go along and wait near that chronometer shop until I send for you."

"Will it take long, Len?"

"I never take long over anything."

Len asked the office lad what the mat was doing outside the door; the office lad answered he supposed it was looking for a friend, and Len retorted (very properly, as I thought), that if there was any more impudence, the lad would change places with the mat.

Odd to notice how quickly the fog went, once determined to go. A slight moving in the air lifted it from the pavement, rolled it away in the direction of Tower Hill, where it apparently hoped to make a last determined stand, leaving the streets free, so that traffic again began to move industriously. Arriving clerks with black rims around eyes talked with enthusiasm of the delays experienced; City policemen slapped shoulders, saying to each other, "Well, that was a thick 'un, if you like!" gas was turned off in shop windows. As I waited impatiently for the summons, it seemed encouraging to find that a morning which, opening inauspiciously, thus suddenly changed its manner, and I did not mind the bustling people who resented my stationary attitude. The family whistle reached my ears, the one we always gave in Woodpecker Road.

"Is it settled?"

"I've done my part," he said. "The rest depends upon you. Take care not to pretend to be clever."

Len knocked at the door of a room in the offices marked "Private" and took me in. The room had but one window, and this had not received attention for some time; a shaded



Argand lamp sent all its light on a circle of the table; an intensified scent of the wine atmosphere that permeated the whole of the offices and a good half of the pavement outside was here. A gentleman, breathing heavily, sat in a semi-circular chair for which he had apparently been measured, and looking at his watery eyes, I had a sudden fear that the main features of the interview with Mr Latham were about to repeat themselves.

"This plays," he panted, "the deuce with me!"

"Never knew anyone suffer as you do, sir," remarked my brother, briskly. The gasping gentleman seemed gratified. "But asthma never kills. Medical men tell me it's often accompanied by perfect health in every other way. Strangely enough, it frequently attacks men of great mental ability."

"That's really so? Read you those verses of mine, didn't I? Those I knocked off the other day in the Underground Railway about hope?" My brother gave a nod which intimated that the privilege was not likely to escape memory; I wondered whether they had both forgotten my presence. "Rather a neat idea that of hope being swift and flying with the wings of a swallow, eh?"

"Poor Tennyson would have given something to have hit upon it. Much overrated, as a writer, don't you think, sir?"

"I daren't say that," remarked the wine merchant, examining the almanac printed on a paper-knife. "Whatever I may think, Drew, I dare not say it, because people would set it down at once to professional jealousy. What's that boy doing in the corner over there? Thought we'd just given him the sack."

"This is a lad named Henry, sir."

"Henry what?"

"Surname Henry," answered Len, readily. "Says he wants a berth as office lad. I've been talking to him, and he seems a likely chap."

"Know anything about him, Drew, apart from that?"

"He writes a good hand, sir, and he tells me he's living with his mother at—Where was it?"

"New Cross," I said, stepping forward. "In regard to what has been said about Tennyson, I don't altogether agree."

"Quiet, please!" ordered Len, in a voice new to me. "Listen to Mr Penshurst!"

Mr Penshurst shifted some of the articles on the table, a stick of sealing-wax, a tray of penholders, a paper-weight, and, his asthma returning, said I should have to be a good lad, respectful to my superiors. Willing, obliging, civil.

"And loyal," added Len.

"That's the word, loyal. Tell him what to do, Drew."

"Very good, sir. Shall we make it eight or ten?"

"Which you please."

"We'll say ten," remarked my brother, turning to me and again speaking sharply. "Bear in mind the good advice Mr Penshurst has given. Don't talk to the other clerks until I have seen you. Go outside and wait!"

Len, to my great delight, did a gracious thing, that sent me up, on this eventful day, to the highest heaven.

"You'll come and eat with me," he said. "Be in Mincing Lane at one o'clock."

It was not easy to pretend calm, or affect composure in the busy streets, and more than once whilst waiting on the edge of the pavement I found myself spun around by the impact of some person in a hurry; the apologies I offered were ignored, and it soon became clear that it was useless to beg for pardon in the City; what one had to do was to guard oneself and dodge alertly. If you were near a side turning a perfect whirlwind of folk might come across at any moment; at no point were you secure from men who rushed out of doorways with sample paper-bags in their hands as though determined to beat the progress of the clock; the only satisfaction gained in the dizziness that came from these

surroundings was the hope that some day I, too, might wear a silk hat at the back of the head and race about in similar manner. Len, coming across the roadway, was caught by a young bare-headed man, going in an opposite direction; the two engaged at once in animated conversation, and I watched them interestedly until a nod ordered me to move away.

"Follow!" said Len, passing me presently.

He turned into a narrow alley off Fenchurch Street and, stopped at the entrance to a house with no sign, no name, no indication of the trade carried on there. On the dim windows could be seen, in silhouette, the shadows of a row of men wearing hats.

"If you ever catch sight of me again engaged in talk with some one in a public place," he said, quietly and distinctly, as I came up to him, "remember that it is not necessary for you to proclaim your interest quite so plainly. An open mouth, is not, in itself, evidence of an intelligent brain." I accepted the rebuke.

He glanced in at the pews on the ground floor where men, evidently belonging to the higher aristocracy of the City, were lunching. The place appeared to be full, and he turned and went up the narrow staircase to the next floor where two patrons were, most fortunately, at the moment giving up seats, and preparing to give a penny to the white capped cook, a penny to the lad who had attended to them, a penny to the head waiter. Len issued his orders; we had scarcely the time to hang up our hats before a wonderful steak was in front of each of us, with a dish of cabbage pressed down into a slab shape, and potatoes in their jackets.

I cannot remember, before or since, any meal so good, or any taken in less comfortable circumstances. We were on a narrow form against the wall, the white cloth'd table in a position that left scarcely an inch to spare; the table, it may be added, was so narrow that one's bread easily became confused with the bread of the *vis-à-vis*. The rule of my



youth, that it was wrong to speak with one's mouth full, appeared to be here suspended ; I could not attempt to comprehend the talk that was going on, for I was no sooner on the edge of understanding something about a transaction in wheat, than I was taken off to shipping, from this I had to jump to sugar, thence to coals.

"A bottle of cider," commanded Len.

"A bottle of cider, sir ; yes, sir," said the head waiter. "James, a bottle of cider for these two gents."

It tasted to me more like wine than any wine I had ever sipped, and I readily agreed to Len's suggestion that my glass should be only half filled.

"Do you come here every day, Len?"

"Can't afford it," he replied, "or else I would. I'm a great believer in good feeding. A man like me ought to keep body and soul together."

No one realised the truth of this more than myself.

"I'm just giving you this as a start off," he went on, "and because I want you to see how well a man can do himself in the City if he only has the good luck to attain a certain position. People will talk to you about hard work, but that is an old-fashioned theory, and they only preach it from force of habit. Good luck is the great thing. Good luck comes, sooner or later, to everybody in this world ; the important matter is to keep a sharp look-out for it and make sure it doesn't escape you."

"Like wicket keeping."

"Exactly!" (You cannot guess how pleasant it was to receive Len's approval.) "Let the ball go past, and some one else may secure it and get all the credit. What you have to do is to stand up close to the stumps, and be ready for everything. I've done fairly well hitherto, but what I have done is nothing compared with what I am going to do. You see that rather bald chap just going out?"

The man was having some dispute with the elderly head waiter in regard to the quality of a coin.

"One of the biggest scamps this side of Ludgate Circus," declared Len.

"They ought not to allow him to come into a decent chop house like this."

"Why not?"

The question startled me so much that I found myself unable to answer it.

"Perfect right to come in here or anywhere," contended my brother. "When I say he's a scamp, all I mean is that he'll get the best of anybody if he can, and that in regard to women—— But there's a man who enjoys every moment of his life, mind you. Always plenty of money, and always spending it like a prince. Can you guess what he gives for his cigars?"

The sum proved to be one exceeding my most adventurous estimate.

"Compare his life with that of Rounceby in our firm. Rounceby is a man who looks after a Bible Class on Sunday, and has no other form of amusement whatever. If he takes a penny stamp out of the drawer for his private use, he puts a penny back, instead of just inserting some name and address in the book. The other day, he jumped into a second-class compartment at Ilford by mistake, and at Liverpool Street insisted on paying excess to the ticket collector. Rounceby wears one collar three days. You can take it from me that Rounceby has had chances that come in the way of all of us, and has declined to take full advantage of them. Waiter, bring some of that cheddar and some celery."

He turned to me again.

"Now which would you rather be of the two?" he demanded.

"Aren't there other alternatives, Len?"

He repeated the question, and I felt myself compelled to give the answer that I knew he wanted me to give.

"That's right!" he said, approvingly. "If I thought you were going to join the Rouncebys, I shouldn't take any

further interest in you. I should drop you, just as I drop this piece of bread now. Try to recollect what I've told you, and run off back now to Great Tower Street like a good chap."

When Len returned a quarter of an hour later he asked me rather sharply, in the presence of the others, whether I had been out to lunch.

I assured him later that I perfectly understood his motives in regard to the selection of a name; it was clear the other clerks might speak of influence and favouritism if our relationship became known. All the same, it did seem peculiar in the early days to be ordered about by Len, to be reprimanded by him, for him to stand by whilst the rest were chaffing. The work was not hard, and one of my principal duties, apart from running to the Customs House, and taking messages to the firm of carriers who had a contract with us, was to submit to the rather clumsy efforts of the clerks to perfect themselves in the art of what they called chipping. It pleased them to assume I had come to Great Tower Street from the Foundling Hospital, and when they discovered in the agony columns of the daily papers, inquiries concerning the whereabouts of some missing person, the elaborate joke built upon this lasted for a day. They borrowed paper from neighbouring offices, and sent notes to me saying that if Mr Henry would call on the above firm at 1.30 p.m. on Thursday he would hear of something to his advantage; I was just sharp enough, thank goodness, to parry all these attempts, but the hard thing was to keep back the retorts that were ready. Good repayment came at the end of the first week when I walked home with my wages in a handkerchief carefully concealed inside my left boot. I reached Woodpecker Road limping, but my mother's gasp of astonishment when she saw the lordly column of silver beside her supper plate, enabled me to forget this.

"Had my worries, in the past," she confided to me, "daresay I shall have worries in the future, but with a dear



boy like Len, and another coming on like you, Henry, why I can see that there's good cause to be thankful. Help yourself to butter and radishes, just as your brother does."

A great evening that, an evening of emancipation. I warned myself never to forget that it was to Len I owed my first start.

## CHAPTER IV

### LEN AND A QUARREL

PROGRESS on the part of a South Londoner is always exhibited by a move in a more southerly direction ; the last idea to occur to him would be to take the desperate course of going over the bridges and taking up residence in the Western or Northern districts.

"Hampstead?" says the South Londoner, with a shiver. "Oh, I shouldn't like to live right up there."

Improved means of communication may have enlarged his views of London, but at the time of which I am writing, ambition took his thoughts into Surrey or towards Kent, and certainly, in our case, Blackheath was the goal. There were evenings when Len was compelled to stay indoors because he had a cold, and on these occasions we talked of Blackheath—which is to say that he talked and we listened—my mother and I begrudging calls from the shop, serving customers who interrupted, and were prepared for leisurely exchange of views on public and private grounds with an alacrity that astonished and annoyed. We ourselves were forced to exhibit amazement on one evening of the kind when Len hinted that the Blackheath house might prove rather limited in space and accommodation, and began to talk of Chislehurst.

"But you don't mean to say—" began my mother, recovering powers of speech.

"The tendency is to go further out," explained Len. "There's a man at office only earning two-eighty a year, who has just gone to live at Blackheath. The district is evidently going down."

"A very good class of people," declared my mother,

"lived there in my day. Just round where our house was you wouldn't find many with less than a couple of thousand a year. Besides," she pleaded, "there's the idea."

"There are ideas," he said, "and ideas. Some are better than others."

"That is so," I agreed.

"I've an impression it would be wise to buy land and put up a house according to one's own plans. I go about a good deal, and I rather fancy the perfect house has not yet been built. For instance, I shouldn't let the architect have it all his own way."

My mother recalled an instance which occurred at a country village in her youth. A retired coal-merchant resolved to build a house out of his own head, and only when his attention was called to the fact by friends invited to look over the rooms, did he discover the omission of a staircase. Declining to admit himself in the wrong, he went to bed for the rest of his life with the assistance of a ladder.

"I must inquire about the shooting," Len went on. "Rather pleasant to be able to ask a few men down and to bring their guns. That won't be much in your line, I'm afraid," turning to me.

I suggested dexterity might come with practice.

"Cricket will be your department, I think. Between us we ought to be able to pick out some promising youngsters, and give poor old Kent a better chance of gaining the championship. Plenty of talent about. It only wants encouragement."

He accepted my earnest assurance that I would do everything possible to help the scheme.

"Of course," he pointed out, "all this won't happen for some time yet." My mother instanced the case of Rome. "What encourages me, if I may say so without conceit, is the level of stupidity I find around me in Great Tower Street. There are men, occupying good positions, who



really ought to be selling matches in the street, or playing with pebbles down at Brighton. How they get there is what puzzles me."

I suggested influence.

"Well," he laughed, "if that has anything to do with success, I shall use it for all it's worth. But ingenuity is what one ought to rely upon. In the long run, ingenuity must tell. And there's something else. Something else equally important. That is, not to waste time in helping other people. I've been told of cases where a man has been pulled back, and delayed all his life by a host of folk—relatives and so forth—just because he regarded them as having some claim upon him. I'm perfectly confident that isn't the way to play the game, and I'm jolly well certain it's not the way I'm going to play it."

My mother brought forward his tumbler of steaming black currant mixture, and warned him to be careful of his throat, but nothing ever stopped Len when he wanted to talk, just as few things could arouse him when he wished to be silent. He ordered me to bring a map of Kent which Ernest Fowler and I had bought for information concerning walks.

"You see how it all goes on this side of the river," he explained to me with his forefinger on the map. "Here we begin first with Rotherhithe and Bermondsey. Then comes, with a few intervening market gardens, our own delightful, idyllic New Cross, reeking with corduroy and the scent of soap factories. That's where we are now, and that's where I do believe you, yourself, are quite content to remain. We go over New Cross Road——"

"Takes a bit of doing."

"We go over New Cross Road, and then begins at once something more like decency and space to breathe. No more of those curiously frank backs of houses with sooty slips of gardens, and unspeakable people, but dwellings, don't you know, of a fair size and appearance. The Hilly Fields and Hither Green, and there you are bang in the country.

Remind me to find out, when I get better, what a first-class season-ticket to Chislehurst costs."

"How long do you think it will be, Len," I asked, eagerly, "before it happens?"

He borrowed a pencil from me, made some calculations on the margin of his evening paper. Audited the figures carefully, and made more calculations. Then he tossed it across the table, and found his book. "Leave me alone now," he said, "I want to read."

We examined the notes he had made by the oil-lamp in the shop, and my mother clicked her tongue to indicate surprise.

"Mind you," I whispered, "he'll do it. Len is just the sort of chap who makes up his mind to do a thing, and allows nothing to stand in his way. If I had any money, I'd put it all on Len."

"It's wicked to bet," she remarked, "but I quite agree with you. Let's have a look at your boots. How do you wear them down at the heels, to be sure!"

The walking to and fro was an excellent idea (on some days in the winter I dodged it and took tram-car from the Gate to St George's Church). Early mornings and late evenings were still given to the shop: mother argued the success of such an establishment depended on the fact that people could say, at any time before eleven at night, "Better run to Drew's; Drew's is sure to be open!" Saturday afternoons too were reserved for Woodpecker Road, and Mrs Croucher, hard by, hitherto a bitter critic where I was concerned, began to compare me with her own son whose head, it seemed, was crowded with football to the exclusion of all else. There is no need to take any credit for the working at home; adequate payment came in the new terms existing between my mother and myself. Admitted now to an acquaintance with home finances, and allowed to inspect accounts, I could see there had been a fierce struggle in the years following the tumble-down at Blackheath; my mother told me that more than once she had been tempted to give up the effort

of keeping her head above water, and to finish it all in the canal. (You will observe it never is the fighting class, to which she by birth belonged, that ends trouble in this way; the emergency exit appears to be used by those who, accustomed to a well-made feather-bed all their lives, suddenly find in it a crumpled rose-leaf). I do believe my mother in looking back, considered the time of opulence as something in the nature of a disturbing, and a regrettable incident, and she always said that expensive cigars ruined father's constitution. We made an agreement, on her recommendation, that I was to smoke on my seventeenth birthday, not before, and that she would buy my first pipe.

An admirable disaster occurred in Great Tower Street, nothing less than the sudden disappearance of two serious and mature clerks—one the sober Rounceby—with a hundred and fifty pounds. They had been doing their work as cashiers with clock-work regularity for years; never late arriving in the morning, never early going at night; both married and with children. Sometimes in the lunch hour, which they spent frugally in resting on London Bridge watching the loading and unloading of big boats, I heard them confide to each other accounts of discussions which appeared to be one-sided and consisting of monologues for one female character, but it never occurred to me that these slightly grey, whiskered, and rather stout gentlemen would do anything sporting or adventurous. Len was greatly amused at the smallness of the sum they had taken; the fact that they were insured in a Guarantee Society enabled Mr Penshurst to look at the event from the same point of view. My brother found increased cause for satisfaction on being promoted to the desk hitherto occupied by the two emigrants where he had full access to all the books, and was able to pass on to some one else the task of running about during the day. I received an increase of four shillings a week and became a junior clerk; the new lad who took my place called me Mr Henry, and had to make toast for me at the gas-stove at four o'clock.

My mother would not, to mark the occasion, go to a theatre, although I made the offer of the Haymarket with "A Man's Shadow," and I compromised by treating her to the most conspicuous local entertainment. Mother's objection to a play was based on the grounds that folk seeing her in widow's weeds would remark she had easily forgotten her husband; she also contended it was impossible to go to any London place of amusement without meeting somebody from Blackheath. So Mrs Croucher took charge of the shop, and I escorted my mother up the hill, over New Cross Road (which always seemed to make a strict division between affluence and moderate income) along Lewisham High Road, where Milly Fowler and Ernest waited for us.

"The first time, my dear," said mother to the girl, "the very first time, I do assure you, that I've been to anything of the kind since my poor husband was taken. And now I shouldn't be here if Henry hadn't worried the soul out of me."

"Quite right of him," remarked Milly. She took the box of chocolates I had bought, and handed them to my mother, as we walked down the covered passage.

"Mind you, my dear, I'm not prejudiced. When I was a young woman—older than what you are at present, but still young—I was a perfect terror at getting about here, there, and everywhere. Flighty was the only word for it. I remember once going to see 'The Green Bushes' at the Adelphi, and I let the young gentleman I was with put down four shillings, four solid silver shillings, and take two checks, and we were inside and sitting down before either of us remembered that we'd come with two advertising orders. He pretended not to mind, but I tell you, it spoilt my evening. Here's where you pay, Henry!"

I was an amateur in taking care of ladies, and Ernest could not give much assistance, but we did the best we could, although Milly whispered to me once or twice a direction not to fuss. Some comedians who called themselves



The Phour Phunny Phellows, but whose entertainment scarcely came up to the standard suggested by the title, opened the evening, and if the performance had struck the highest possible note of humour, my mother could not have been more completely diverted. It was good to see her shaking with laughter; when she caught my eyes, she whispered to Milly Fowler that she supposed Henry had never seen her like this before; Len, if he had been here, would be able to tell them that he could remember the time when she was always merry and bright.

"But then," she explained, "he was such a jolly baby. Henry here, why you had to tickle him and pinch his nose and put your finger down his neck to get a smile out of him."

"Where's Len this evening?"

"I never ask, my dear," replied my mother, confidentially. "That's the greatest mistake a parent can make. Henry, of course, I don't let go out of sight if I can help it, but Len is older. Besides," she added, "if I asked him he wouldn't tell me the truth. I don't grumble though. I'm very thankful," impossible for me to avoid hearing this, "very thankful to know they're both living at home, and both getting on so well together. That's where the trouble would be, if they set to, wrangling. Now, what's coming next?"

The audience seemed to enjoy the exhibition of hypnotism, and I daresay I should have shared only that Ernest had so many theories to confide to me. First, the white-faced young men on the platform were all, in his opinion, paid to act the fool and pretend; later, the professor was a man accustomed to humbug people, but he could not succeed with Ernest; later still, the whole affair was undeniably genuine from start to finish, and there was more in this than some people imagined. A strong mind, contended Ernest when my attention wandered in the direction of his sister, a strong mind always influenced every other mind not so strong. Take the case of myself, for instance. I might not recognise it, perhaps, but those who knew us saw that Len at any moment could

exercise power over me and compel me to do almost anything. I argued that not Len, nor anyone else could force me to do anything against my will; Ernest retorted mysteriously he was not so sure of this. Meanwhile, on the platform continued the extraordinary sport of the Professor putting the subjects into a trance, giving them a glass of water, and telling them that it was port wine, or paraffin, or quinine, whereupon the taster immediately gave the contortion of features appropriate to the liquid named. Still in the hypnotised state, they were told that they were Kate Vaughan at the Gaiety and began to dance ludicrously; informed they were Sims Reeves, they sang "Come into the garden, Maud." At the end, all stood about in absurd attitudes at the command of the Professor, and as he eventually restored them to shame-faced consciousness by blowing sharply into their faces, the violin and piano played triumphant chords.

"I'm telling you the truth, my dear," declared mother to Ernest's sister. "Haven't enjoyed myself so much since my poor husband went bankrupt."

Ernest continued the argument on the way home, coming down so far as the shop in his anxiety to persuade me, pointing out that the mere fact that all these months I had walked to the City and back was a proof of my subjection to the will of Len, but I was able to answer that this arrangement had been mutual. Ernest declared I blacked Len's boots every morning; the reply was that the boots had to be blacked, and no one would expect Len to do this work himself. Ernest suggested the time had come when I should be known at office as Henry Drew; I retorted with an apt Shakesperian quotation. Altogether I answered him uncommonly well, and at any rate, when he and his sister left us, he asserted that I seemed to be getting more obstinate every day.

That evening at the Public Hall was the first essay made in escorting ladies to a place of amusement but not the last. One of our customers happened to be acting manager at the

West End theatre, and apart from the fact that Milly and I had sometimes to see the same piece twice or thrice, that we were generally placed at the side of the upper boxes, the arrival of orders by the morning post was a pure delight. An element of chance existed, for there were several clerks to whom they had to be offered ere they came down to me, and the decision occupied time so that occasionally it happened the tickets were not handed over until just before the hour for leaving; I never allowed them to go below. Then came a mad rush across the bridge to catch an earlier train than usual (the importance of the event justifying any expense); a bounding up the staircase at New Cross; breathless arrival at St Donatt's Road and the issuing of commands to Milly to obtain necessary permission from the authorities and meet me at the station at 7.25; home to Woodpecker Road, and an appeal to mother for special leave of absence, and the loan of one and six; lightning change with clean collar, clean cuffs, and furious brushing of hair; up the hill again, and, in the train, Milly and I always said triumphantly and exhaustedly—

“Another two minutes, and we should have missed it!”

These were exceptional incidents and for the rest, I still kept up the practice of walking to office, getting to know every shop-window in Old Kent Road, and nearly every article in every shop-window; becoming on nodding terms with some of the shop-keepers. Len about this time complained that constant supervision by the travelling collectors made his daily journey intolerable for him, and hinted that it would become necessary to take a room, or rooms in town; my mother greatly perturbed, pointed out that he could easily, at the expiration of the quarter, transfer his patronage to the other company.

“There's something else,” he said. We were talking the subject over on a Sunday afternoon when we had induced mother to go with us by tram-car to Greenwich Park; some well-dressed young men had just gone by, giving surprised salutations to Len. “I get a number of things to do in the

evening after leaving office, and I don't want that journey down by train the last thing at night."

"Wherever you lived," said my mother, "you'd have to get home somehow."

"It keeps the little man, here, waiting up."

"He does it of his own accord, so that he can have a chat with you, before you both go to bed."

"Mother," said Len, tipping his green chair forward and speaking decisively. "Over there, where I'm pointing with my walking-stick, is the house where I was born."

"That's right," she nodded, slightly relaxing her Sunday demeanour.

"I lived there for some years of my younger life, and you know what my ambition is."

"You hear what he says, Henry? Won't the people round-about talk!"

"For this purpose," Len went on, "I want to feel myself perfectly free and——"

"Untrammelled," I suggested.

"Perfectly free and at liberty to use every moment of my life. Besides, Henry would much rather have the room to himself."

"No!" I said.

"Yes, yes, you would."

"Len," said my mother, after making a semi-circle on the gravel with the toe of her shoe, "I quite understand all your thoughtfulness and consideration, and so on, but you want to do your duty by me, and I'm determined to do my duty by you. You mustn't go thinking it's any trouble, because it isn't. Until you're twenty-five I've got to look after you to the best of my ability, and look after you to the best of my ability I will! Now let's see about getting home to tea; I told Mrs Croucher to take in some crumpets if she heard the man with his bell."

Len and I went on the outside seats and talked; mother said it looked better, in her opinion, for ladies to ride inside.



He wanted to go up to town that evening to see some one on a matter of business, but my mother declared no good could ever come of any transaction conducted on the Lord's day, and he remained at home and read. At half-past nine my mother kissed us, told us not to forget to say our prayers and went up-stairs. Twenty minutes later she was back in her blue dressing-gown; one of the few garments that reminded us of Blackheath.

"Whatever are you two making such a hullabaloo about?" she demanded, sharply. "Never heard such a row in a house of mine in the whole course of my existence. Stop it at once!"

"Make Henry leave off," retorted Len, "and then I'll—How dare you touch me with your fist?" he asked, turning to me. "If you weren't my brother, I'd pay you for that."

"Henry," she cried, shocked, "I'm surprised at you. Thought you'd got better manners."

"Without a single word of warning," Len explained, "he suddenly raised his arm and gave me a most violent blow. I tell you what it is, mother; I can put up with a good deal, but I cannot and will not put up with this. The same house won't hold Henry and myself."

"And I thought," she wailed, "that you two were getting on so nicely together."

"Stood it as long as I can," he announced, banging at the American cloth-covered table, "been prepared to put up with a good deal, mother, rather than upset you, or cause you any annoyance, but this marks the limit. You don't know all I've had to endure."

"I'm dazed," stammered my mother. "It's all come on me like a flash of lightning on a clear day. I must be asleep, surely, and dreaming."

"I'm a quiet chap," continued Len, "and only want everything to go on smoothly. But my life here, at home, has for some time past been perfectly intolerable, and I'm determined to put a stop to it. This night," he announced, loudly, "this very night, I leave!"

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Henry," she asked, trembling, "or what? You stand there like a dummy, with not a word to say for yourself; I think you must be gone suddenly mad. Pull yourself together and tell me what it all means! Or must I give you a good shaking."

"Mother," interposed Len, speaking gently, "there's no necessity for this painful scene to continue. When we were talking this afternoon about my leaving here, I little imagined these would be the circumstances in which I should go. I'll pack my bag at once, and you can send my books on so soon as I give you an address. You can imagine how much it hurts me to say good-bye."

"My dear," she said, firmly, "you're not going to say good-bye. If, as you tell me, you and Henry can't get along together comfortably any longer, then it's not you who is going to be turned out. It's this bad-tempered boy here, who'll have to go."

They both looked at me; I kept my gaze on the pattern of the linoleum and did not speak. "That's what's going to happen," declared mother.

"No," cried Len, "no! We must try to look at the whole matter calmly, and do the right thing. Henry is still a mere lad. He requires a mother's care. Thrown out with no one to look after him, he would go from bad to worse. I've seen many cases of the kind, and I don't want to think that a brother of mine is going to add himself to them. Our family has suffered enough as it is."

She burst into tears, and taking his hand, kissed it.

"Henry," he ordered, "go upstairs and put all my things in my Gladstone bag. I want to speak to mother privately. Knock twice on the floor when you're finished."

My mother was more like herself when I returned. She pleaded with Len to forgive me and to part on friendly terms; he held out his hand and I took it. There was time by hurrying to catch the last Sunday night train to town, and when my mother asked where he intended to sleep, he protested, good-humouredly, that if he stayed to

answer all her questions it would mean walking about until morning. She offered to carry the bag, but he said that this should be my privilege, and I was ordered to go on with it in advance for fear my bad temper might again burst out.

"Thanks, very much, little man," he said, as we waited for the train. "Remind me to-morrow at office, in case I forget it, to hand over my season to you. It's nearly run out, but you may as well have it for the remainder of the time."

"But is it transferable?"

Len had to take the support of the closed bookstall.

"The strangest youngster," he declared, amusedly, "I ever came across. There's no guessing what attitude you'll take up next."

"At any rate," I said, rather warmly, "I did as you asked me to do this evening."

"You acted the part well," he admitted. "I was afraid you might overdo it, but you managed to touch just the right note. A pity to have to impose upon her; no one regretted that more than myself, but it seemed the only way."

"You'll ask me up to see your rooms, Len, when you're settled down?"

"That," he replied, rather doubtfully, "depends on circumstances."

For a whole week, my mother did not speak a word to me.

## CHAPTER V

### LEN BRINGS NEWS

MR PRENTICE sent for me one afternoon and spoke so sharply for a quarter of an hour, that I came out of his room with the feeling of one who had narrowly escaped hanging. His attention had been called to the fact that the writing of Mr Drew (at the cashier's desk) and the penmanship of young Henry (in the outer office) were almost identical; it had been pointed out to Mr Prentice that this might, in certain circumstances prove awkward and confusing, and he took me severely to task about it. Admitting that the natural act with youth was to imitate — Mr Prentice was acquainted with the work of poets who had not the wisdom or the patience to wait for maturity before dipping their pen in the ink-stand, and these invariably copied some rhymes of eminence in a slavish manner—admitting also that Mr Drew was a worthy example (Mr Prentice could scarcely understand why he was not more popular with his colleagues) still, two handwritings of an identical style could not be permitted. Not for a single moment. Quite out of the question. In no office would such a thing be tolerated.

"You understand. See to it at once. You're a good clerk otherwise; Mr Drew speaks highly of you, and I place every reliance on his powers of observation, but if you're going to do silly things like this, why——"

Mr Prentice waved a hand across his table and left the remainder of the sentence to my imagination.

I felt depressed, and clerks in the office, seeing this, foreshadowed the sack, the kick-out, the push, and several other variations signifying dismissal. A more cheerful view



presented itself, some weeks later, when I found myself able to do something for Len; something which, so he assured me, in his generous way, balanced accounts between us, and gave me the right, if I chose to exercise it, of regarding him as a debtor. Len allowed me to go part of the way with him that evening in the direction of his rooms.

"You can talk about it as you like," contended Len, as we went down the steps at Moorgate Street. "(Take your return half before I forget it.) You did me a service to-day that wont easily pass out of my mind."

"Didn't much care about it."

"A wise lie," said my brother, "is much more commendable than the clumsy truth. As a matter of fact, there was no harm in copying out the names and addresses of customers, and I daresay I could have carried them securely in my head, but there are one or two seniors in the place who have taken a dislike to me, and if I had had to confess to old G. W. P. that the list was in my handwriting, they might have made it warm. You behaved like a brick. Here's our train!"

He laughed at me for refusing to get into a first-class, and told me as we went through the smoky tunnel that I was an elderly spinster.

"It won't do you any harm," returning to the subject in the train, "because I can always smooth G. W. P. down. In fact, I told him just before he left this evening that it was the natural result of over-anxiety on your part; merely an excess of industry. I'll see that your position is secure, little man, before I go."

"You're not going to leave Prentice's?"

"Surely you never thought a man of my abilities would be a fixture there, like the bunch of wooden grapes over the doorway. You, yourself, will make a move sooner or later."

At Portland Road we stepped out into the thick clouds, and upstairs he showed me where I could take the train

back to the city. "Remember," he said, with his hand on my shoulder, "to come along one evening and see me. We'll fix up a date and I'll ask a lot of people. Don't lose yourself going home, and give my love to mother, and say I'm always thinking about her!"

I decided not to use the return half, although anything like waste was, at that time, extremely painful to me, and walked down Gower Street, which appeared to me less interesting as a thoroughfare, than Old Kent Road. With the exultation of mind which always came when I had been able to do anything for Len, I very much desired a companion, but only found a hoarse-voiced man who wanted to sell me some cigars which, he declared, had been smuggled (it was not easy to see why), and a poor old soul who came with an appeal to purchase kettle-holders. Consequently, when, at a corner near Bedford Square, I saw a young couple exchanging fervent kisses of farewell and heard the youth, lifting his hat, saying as he went, in broken English, "I lof you!" it was gratifying to discover that the girl was Kitty Latham, who announced herself as equally glad to meet me; she felt prepared to accept my escort to London Bridge Station, where I could also take train for home.

"Who was that chap?"

"Only a pick-up," Kitty answered, indifferently. "He spoke to me this evening when I was with a girl friend listening to the band in Hyde Park."

"Seems to me altogether wrong," with some heat, "for a girl of your age and your appearance——"

"Do you think I'm good-looking?"

"Matter of taste," I retorted. "Why do you let a man do that when he has only known you a short time?"

"I gave you a chance once," she said, light-heartedly. "You'll have to wait now until I'm in the mood."

"Good gracious," I cried, amazed at the interpretation placed on my inquiry. "I don't want you to kiss me, and I don't want to kiss you."

We walked down Holborn with a sufficient space intervening between us, but near Gray's Inn Road, two young blades, who had crossed from Chancery Lane, coughed and whistled and tried to attract her attention, and I went nearer to her.

"Daresay you're right," she said, penitently; "but you don't understand me, Henry, and sometimes I don't understand myself. If I had work to do, it would be different. If I'd something to engage my mind, daresay I should be steadier. But father won't allow me to do anything about the house; says he wants me to be a lady; expects me to stay at home in the evening whilst he——" She broke off hopelessly, "And there you are!"

As we walked along Newgate Street and Cheapside, with only a few omnibuses and cabs taking the place of crowded traffic of day, I became eloquent, and she nodded her red hat, agreeing with every argument, saying, "Expect you're right, Henry!" and, "That is so, when you come to think of it," and presently delighting me by saying that my voice was almost exactly like the voice of Len. "Only," she added, and this pleased me too, "he, of course, is so much brighter!" Near the King William statue she promised she would never again allow a foreigner to speak to her whilst listening to the band in Hyde Park, and when I tried to widen the area, begged me not to be too hard. Kitty felt sure we were going to be friends after all, and I declared I had long since forgotten my grievance against her father. A man in a good position in Great Tower Street, with all the admirable prospects that the wine trade promised, could afford to put out of his memory an early rebuff.

As I said good-bye to Kitty outside New Cross Station, and accepted her thanks, my friend Ernest Fowler and his sister came up Amersham Vale. I explained everything to Milly at considerable length, and she spoke of the concert given to railway-men where Ernest had recited "The Signalman's Child," and she received an encore for a violin solo. Such a good-natured audience, she remarked; I said

that seemed evident; I offered to carry her case, but Milly expressed the opinion that I must be feeling tired after the long walk.

"You're huffy about something."

"Not at all!" she declared.

"Oh yes, you are. You're upset because you saw me with Kitty Latham, and you think that what I've been telling you about meeting her accidentally isn't true."

"Never imagined for a moment, Henry, that you had the sense or quickness to invent anything."

"Really?" hurt by this. "Then perhaps you will kindly allow me to tell you what happened at office to-day."

It was always difficult for me to understand why everybody had not the same regard and affection for Len which I felt, and Milly's comments seemed to prove one had overrated her intelligence. Ernest, called in to arbitrate, said, after taking time for reflection, that there was much to be said on both sides, and proceeded to say it, involving himself in such a mist of argument that Milly and I became, in contradicting his views, almost amiable with each other. We sent him on to open the door in St Donatt's Road.

"All the same," said Milly, lowering her voice, "I do think you ought to be careful."

"As capable of looking after myself as most people."

"Everybody thinks that about themselves. You don't hear all that I hear."

"I wouldn't be a girl," I cried, vehemently, "and go in for this tittle-tattle, and slandering, for all the money in the world. And you only say it because you're jealous."

"Jealous of you?"

"Jealous of me," I said, steadily.

"Now, I wonder," she remarked, "I wonder whether you're right. Anyhow, I'd rather be fond of you than of that brother of yours."

"Just shows," triumphantly, "what a poor judge you are. Why, there are girls who would give their front teeth to get a smile from Len."



"We can't settle it by talking like this. What's to-day? April the twenty-first, eighteen ninety-one. Now look here. In ten years time, that is to say, on April the twenty-first, nineteen hundred and one, if we are both alive, we'll arrange to meet and we'll find out then which of us is right."

"Arrange to meet?" I stammered. "Why, what do you mean? We shall be married by that time."

"Who to?"

"To each other!"

"You dear boy!" cried Milly. She glanced up and down the road, and gave me her lips.

Began, the devoted period that comes, one may hope, to most lads and to every girl. In regard to the work in Great Tower Street, it is probable an endeavour was made to give (as the shop circulars say), the same satisfaction as heretofore, although I often detected just in time, some ridiculous blunder. With every interval a terrible stab would come as my imagination thought of her as smiling or cheerful, when I happened to be gloomy and reserved. Every minute not given to her company seemed a woeful waste of time; I reproved myself severely on finding that, during some stress of business I had allowed five minutes to go by without thinking of Milly; my prayers at night assumed an extravagant length, and I was, I remember, careful to point out that whilst her happiness was most earnestly desired, this happiness had to be coincident with my own. In retrospection, the experience seems pleasant to regard, but it is impossible to conceal the fact that at the time I was disturbed to the point of acute unhappiness. Perhaps my mind was slightly unhinged; perhaps no youth, deeply in love, is in full possession of all his senses. Certainly, my love for Milly reduced every other interest to small dimensions. The political world ceased to exist, my annoyance with Mr Gladstone vanished entirely. I went to church because Milly went to church, I should have become a Pedo-Baptist if she had been one, and instead of listening to the sermon, I counted the times that her lace collarette rose and

fell ; sometimes trying to take her hand furtively and receiving a tap of reproof ; in the highest stage of delight when we shared a hymn book. From Milly I accepted criticism that no one else had dared to give. Since the age of twelve I had been under the impression that I could sing the alto part ; it was Milly who pointed out that merely to give the air an octave lower than most people, did not count for perfect melody, and her recommendation that I should, in future, abstain altogether, was readily taken. The idea that a green necktie suited me and struck a note of independence in my costume was similarly corrected. Milly hinted that she liked me best in a silk hat, and if the cricketing season had been on I should probably have adopted a custom of Hambledon players in the old days. It is not certain whether, in any case, I should have reciprocated with words of advice but, in point of fact, she seemed to me perfect. And how we chattered as we walked together !

Anyone listening might have thought we were acquaintances hitherto barred from exchanging thoughts and now permitted the first opportunity. My own part of the conversation was mainly devoted to the subject of Len and his prospects ; Milly's share seemed to consist of inquiries concerning the precise moment when I found that I loved her, but apart from this there was never any lack of topics ; frequently at the moment of saying good-bye, Milly would remark after hours of talk,—

“Something I particularly wanted to tell you, but it has clean gone out of my head.”

And I always endured the torment after leaving her, of recollecting some item of the highest importance I had meant to communicate.

The walks we took were generally in common-place thoroughfares, but they never seemed common-place to us. Shops of Lewisham High Road, formerly reckoned of ordinary merit, were exalted by reason of a casual word of approval from Milly, and one narrow path leading from the top of Loampit Hill, and appropriately called Love Lane,

seemed to have been made specially for us; we strongly resented the occasional presence of any other young couples. It came out at the top of what is now a road of smart houses looking over Hilly Fields, and the great joy then was to lose ourselves amongst partially made streets and roam about until we struck a main road. We cherished a superstition that to encounter anyone known to us by sight was an occurrence little short of fatal.

"Did you see who that was?" whispered Milly, in tragic tones. "Hope to goodness she didn't catch sight of us. It'll be all over the place if she did."

It was not easy to decide whether annoyance was equalled or over-balanced by satisfaction when comments reached my ears. To Mrs Croucher news was brought, and Mrs Croucher entered on the task of rallying with extraordinary zest. It formed part of her humour, broad without being particularly deep, to assume that I was already married and with the responsibility of grown up children.

"Been thinking all the morning about Tommy," she would remark. "Seems to me it's about time we decided what to do with him."

"Tommy who?"

"I'm referring," with great deliberation and enjoyment, "to your eldest. What is he now? Turned sixteen, isn't he? What I thought was, you ought to see about getting him into an office. Does he favour you, may I ask, or does he favour the missis?"

My reticence, and my attitude of sulkiness, never succeeded in arresting Mrs Croucher until she had used up all her cartridges. Did I not sometimes wish myself a bachelor again, and would I allow her to recommend a good shop for children's boots? Boots ran away with a terrible amount of money to be sure. If Mrs Croucher mistook not, she had caught sight of one of my youngsters—the fifth, she believed—sliding behind a four-wheeler in Queen's Road, Peckham, a few days before, and it was on the tip of her tongue to shout out and order him to let go.

Were the smaller ones getting on all right at school? Great thing to make them keep their little noses to the grindstone, and acquire all the information that teachers could provide. Music knowledge too was not at all a bad idea. If Mrs Croucher were in my place, she would try to arrange an orchestra at home; the missis at the pianoforte, Tommy with his violin, Ethel at the harp, George at the triangle, Bertha at the 'cello, and the happy father giving a definite lead with the cornet. Thus Mrs Croucher, to her great satisfaction, and to my distress.

Nowadays, I have my opinion on early engagements, forgetting, I fear, how extremely wise and sensible Milly and I felt at that time. Our age and our experience and our wisdom were beyond all measuring. No doubt we knew we were open to the charge of precocity, but to a complaint of that kind, youth does not trouble to reply.

One of the Peckham girls came of age, and I remember the occasion because it was the first grown-up party to which I had been invited; this after earning my living in the City for some considerable time. For one thing, we were not acquainted with many people; my mother had always impressed upon us that we must never forget we once lived at Blackheath; one had to be amiable, she admitted, with customers in the shop, but there was no necessity to be friendly with them outside, and I do believe this attitude of aloofness impressed folk, and certainly they could not fail to be affected by Mrs Croucher's reports concerning our earlier days; the habit of that industrious woman being to use the multiplication table freely, so that four servants became twelve, one gardener became four, silver plate became real gold, and my mother in consequence was looked upon, in spite of her simple, ordinary manners, as a retired member of a royal family; one result being that she was called upon to decide questions of nice etiquette which arose within a half mile area, and sometimes on cases of a hypothetical nature, such as, "Supposing I sent in to the lady next door but one in Milton Court Road a slice of my



Christmas pudding and a mince pie, and she only sent me back one of her mince pies, don't you think, ma'am, that I've a good right to speak to her about it, and find out what she means by such an insult?" and other problems of a like delicate character. Apart from this exceptional position, to which our desire and Mrs Croucher's assistance raised us, there was, to explain the absence of parties, the fact that I was in the stage which comes between boyhood and a later period, counted too aged for children's entertainments, too young for entertainments organised on behalf of the mature.

Aunt Mabel exercised great efforts to induce Len to be present, and sent the two girls over to see my mother about it more than once; the ultimatum delivered was, that if Len could not be persuaded to come, then I might consider myself as uninvited. This caused me to bring pressure to bear upon Len; I had already bought a new fancy waistcoat for the occasion, and Milly had been teaching me how to dance, beginning with an intention of carrying me so far as the schottische, but finishing with the announcement that it seemed impossible to convey me beyond the polka.

"No, no," said Len, good-humouredly, "I've done with these wild suburban gaieties. I'm living in London now, and I must make up my mind to settle down. Besides, I'm getting too old for that sort of frivolity."

"And just this minute you were telling me you didn't get to bed until four this morning!"

"One can't do everything," he urged. We were talking in the luncheon hour at a fish restaurant in Arthur Street East; there were not many opportunities now for speaking to him, and at office I was still under a slight cloud of suspicion. Len glanced around from the high stools where we sat at the counter as each new client came in at the street doorway, and when it happened to be someone who knew him, he looked down and busied himself by rubbing his hands on the dependent towels. "I live a fairly full life," he went on, "and I have to be cautious not to overcrowd."

"Len," I said earnestly, "if you care for me at all——"

"Why, of course I care for you, little man," he interrupted. "Don't you ever have any doubts concerning that. Whatever happens to me, I'll see that you are not left behind."

"What I was going to say was," clearing my voice, "that you might go out of your way to give me one proof by coming to Aunt Mabel's party."

"You make it a personal matter?" he asked. "We'll try!" he announced.

This cleared the way, and my mother agreed I could now go on with preparations. She gave me a multitude of hints and warnings regarding behaviour, all in the style of those which she had been in the habit of issuing when was I a child, and had been taken securely wrapped up in a white shawl by a nurse, to be called for by the same young woman at a quarter to seven. I was to be careful not to over-eat, to be sure to speak only when spoken to, to decline a second helping of everything, to remember to say to Aunt Mabel at the end "Thank you very much for a most pleasant evening!" Looking back and reminding myself of this particular occasion, one can see that the good soul never, in spite of the alteration made when I took home my first wages, altogether ceased to regard me as a child. Even when I came near to eighteen she always ordered me out of the shop when lady customers began a confidential lecture on the favourite subject of their ailments.

If anything had been needed to increase my feeling of nervousness on going in at the side door of the undertaker's shop in Meeting House Lane, where the men shaved planks of wood industriously, with a small crowd looking between the diamond shields on the window—"Two orders came unexpected," announced Aunt Mabel, with pride as she received each visitor—it arrived on being asked by the small maid, who knew me quite well, to furnish my name; she took my hat and overcoat and placed them at the back of the shop, selecting, as it proved later, a comfortable couch of sawdust. I caught sight of myself in a glass-covered

engraving of Wellington surveying the field of Waterloo as I went upstairs, and discovered just in time that my necktie was awry.

"Mr 'Enery Drew, please!"

A last blow which sent me well against the ropes came at the sight of two lads in full evening dress; one with a frilled shirt-front that constituted a distinct transgression of the limits of reasonableness.

"You're looking well, Aunt Mabel."

"I suppose that means you think I'm stouter; a most unkind remark, Henry."

"Understood," continued my aunt, "that he was coming with you. You say he's coming on? Well, I hope that what you say is true. Go about and make yourself pleasant. Is that a smudge on your upper lip? Take your handkerchief and rub it off."

I explained this was the beginning of what, it was to be hoped, would prove an excellent moustache.

"And it seems only yesterday," she sighed, "that I was dancing you in my arms and singing 'Banbury Cross.' Look at my two girls with their hair done up and their skirts touching the floor. Dear, dear, how time does fly to be sure! But I musn't stay rattling on to you, you're only a relative. We've got friends who must be attended to; friends in good positions."

We were, so many of us, in such good positions, that we stood about rather haughtily against the rout seats fixed near the walls, despite the efforts of my two cousins who whispered agonisedly each time they passed near me, "The evening's not going, the evening's not going!" In the endeavour to throw off sulkiness, which was beginning to grip me, I went across the room and spoke to a young woman who snapped a "Beg pardon!" and when I repeated that the night was singularly fine retorted, "Thanks for the information!" and became engrossed in the pattern of her fan. The cousin whose birthday it was came and told me the number of presents she had received, and I recollected a

small tissue parcel; she took this and without opening it declared that here was the very thing she had been wanting all along. Some of the ladies hugged rolls of music or secreted them under the seats, and when asked to play or sing, became shocked, saying—

“Oh, I couldn’t think of it, really. You must ask someone else to make a start. It looks so very odd to be the first!”

There came a moment of hope when one of the scarlet candle-shades of the pianoforte happened to catch alight, but once this had been extinguished and folk had expressed the polite hope that I had not burnt myself, conversation dwindled, and Aunt Mabel looked around as one making up her mind to bang two heads together. I found a grim and an entirely neglected lady, who had recently taken up spiritualism; she described a séance in Effra Road, Brixton, at which she had experienced the greatest difficulty in repressing an outburst of merriment.

“And I’m not one to shriek in a general way,” she remarked solemnly. “Now, tell me! How do you account for that? I’m sure there’s a good deal in it!”

Aunt Mabel, in an audible voice, told the two girls something would have to be done; the two girls answered that their mother had only to give her orders and the orders would be carried out; Aunt Mabel replied it was not her party, and indicated that she declined to accept any further responsibility. Supper was handed round by the maid, but even claret cup—

“You needn’t be afraid of it,” said Aunt Mabel, brusquely. “It won’t go to your head!”

—Even claret cup failed to excite in the visitors anything that could be called animation. I ventured to suggest a game of indicating some article in the room which had been selected in my absence, and chose the spiritualist lady as my confederate to remain inside, explaining the scheme to her quite clearly, but her thoughts were elsewhere and she made such an undeniable muddle of the proceedings that not



a single guess was adjudged correct ; she apologised afterwards, and told me she thought that in questioning me she had to speak of the article before something that was black, whereas I, of course, had distinctly told her it must follow. I talked to a lad of about my own age in a corner on Ibsen, a subject that enabled us to meet on equal terms, for neither of us knew anything about it. Aunt Mabel yawned, and asked whether anyone possessed the right time.

"Mr Leonard Drew !"

At once, the room took a different appearance. At once, everybody seemed to wake up and raise the tone of voices. At once, all leaned forward eagerly as troops without a captain greet a new leader. Len had a handsome bracelet for the birthday cousin, and the ladies said enviously "Well, you are a lucky girl !" Len told Aunt Mabel the symmetry of her figure was perfect, and my aunt, when she had been corrected in regard to the meaning of the word, trembled with satisfaction. Len recognised one of the lads as the friend of a friend of his, and they had lively conversation about old F.B., to which we all listened interestedly. Len asked whether the dancing was all over, and being informed it had not begun—

"Thought they wouldn't care for it," remarked my cousins.

—Offered to play the newest waltz furnished by the Promenade Concerts, but no one would hear of this for they wanted him to dance. So somebody played a set of quadrilles, and Len took Aunt Mabel, and I selected a quiet girl who had not hitherto opened her mouth excepting for meringues, and others selected partners, and Len put us all right when moments of indecision came.

He had to go before twelve to catch the last train, and a moan of regret from the flushed delighted company followed us, as, at Aunt Mabel's request, I accompanied him downstairs. The two men had finished their shaving of elm planks ; shutters were closed, but the small crowd that had watched proceedings of the shop and spelt out

name plates earlier in the evening, appeared to have stayed to listen to the music and romping on the first floor.

"By the bye," said Len, as I helped with his overcoat and found his opera hat, "I've left Prentice's."

"No!"

"Or rather, Prentice's has left me. Deuce of a row there this evening after you left. Old G. W. P. and I called each other everything we could lay our tongues to."

"What are you going to do, Len?"

"I'm all right," he answered cheerfully, "I'm on velvet whatever happens. And you're all right, too. See now how wise I was not to let you call yourself by your full name. Anyone named Drew would have had to go with me; anyone called Henry is as safe there as houses!"

## CHAPTER VI

### AN INVITATION FROM LEN

ERNEST FOWLER told me that age was the only thing which ripened experience; he found his earlier arguments in favour of taking a desk in the employ of a large company, or a great corporation (such as the Insurance Office to which he belonged), possessed a flaw. What a man, setting out in life, ought to do was to accept service in a small private firm (resembling the one in Great Tower Street with which I was connected), for there a man's abilities became recognised, and the withdrawal of one comparatively senior clerk meant for other men another good step up the ladder. Ernest tempered all this by the warning that one should not place too much reliance on luck, and when I protested against this remark, found in his pocket a reply from some lady expert in graphology, which he declared settled the point once for all.

"You read what she says," he remarked, handing over the half sheet of note-paper. "It cost me eightpence, but I don't begrudge the money. I sent her a letter you wrote to me a few months ago, and that's her answer."

"You'll excuse me," with stern politeness after reading the ambiguous prophecy, "but at the time you speak of, my writing was exactly like that of Len. Almost exactly like that of Len. So that whatever this woman says about me, applies, to an equal extent, to him."

"Now you're begging the question."

"On the contrary," triumphantly, "I've got you in a corner, and you can't get out of it!"

"Well," he said with reluctance, "suppose we admit that it applies to both of you."

"In that case, I can say that I wish for nothing better than to have the same future Len will enjoy."

Ernest looked about the compartment of the 8.33 in an endeavour to find answer to this.

"How did Surrey get on yesterday at the Oval?" he asked eventually.

With promotion came a sort of knighthood, for I was called Mr Henry by all at office, excepting by Mr Prentice when he was angry and excited; as a set-off to this one had to endure, without a word, comments made by Mr Prentice and the staff on the conduct of my brother. Len had transferred his services to an opposition firm of comparatively modern date in Seething Lane; a firm which possessed a large brass plate, aggressive partners with features made of a like material; a method of advertising which older firms thought undignified. A sale of wines from a royal cellar had taken place, and Len's new people, having secured a small quantity, hinted broadly through the medium of public journals that they had secured possession of the entire stock, offering to send single bottles, as samples, well packed, at prices that made us give the long sniff of contempt. An accentuation of this attitude, with another feeling, came when it was found that some of our customers whose names had been on the books for half a century, ceased to give orders; reminders to them either proved unanswered or elicited the reply that they had decided to give another firm a trial. On these occasions, Mr Prentice would give up the furtive manufacture of poetry, and resigning all pretence of self-control, bounce into the outer office demanding sympathy and support.

"It's that infernal young Drew!" he stormed. "I know who it is we have to thank, as well as anybody. No need for you to tell me. He ought to be locked up!"

The office turning on its high stools, gave a sympathetic murmur. I, alone, continued writing.

"If he doesn't look out, I'll go round to Old Jewry and get the City detectives to watch him. A fellow of the stuff



that Drew is made of, is pretty sure to go too far some day and get his neck well into the noose. When that happens, I'll be there to give it an extra pull."

Office showed deferential agreement.

"Met him in Gracechurch Street this morning, and he had the confounded impudence to lift his hat to me." Office shocked and pained. "Mr Carmichael," to the senior clerk.

"Yes, sir!"

"I want you to issue an order to all of the clerks, instructing them that they are to hold no sort of conversation or communication whatever with this scoundrel. If I find that any one has been exchanging with him so much as a single word, I'll pack him off about his business instantly. Henry!"

I brought my scarlet face round.

"Why don't you listen as the others do, when I'm speaking? Come here, at once. Have you seen anything of this Drew person since the day he left?"

I replied truthfully.

"Now, you're a sharpish lad," holding me by the shoulder. "I'm going to think the matter over before doing anything, but it's possible I may want you to do some special work for me. May want you to go about after this fellow Drew and report each day what he's been up to. I'll see you again about this."

The others, so soon as G. W. P., still grumbling, had retired to his room, where he relieved himself with a furious row over the telephone with a railway goods station, came around me, with congratulations on the signal honour, offering assistance, and expressing surprise that I did not give signs of satisfaction. One who played with the Canonbury Amateur Strollers promised to look after the make-up, strongly recommending black side-whiskers, clerical collar, white tie: for alternative, there was the costume and hat he had worn as Conn the Shaughran at the last quarterly entertainment.

At home in Woodpecker Road I kept all this from my

mother, and indeed there was enough to talk about in a new topic. This wonderful progress of mine suggested it, and as after the closing of the shop (however late we put up the shutters there was sure to be at least one customer banging at the door) we walked down by the market gardens towards the canal bridge and the railway arches—

“A breath of fresh air is what I want, Henry,” she remarked, “to put me right. Don’t go too fast, I’m not nearly so young as I used to be!”

—This was the question we discussed. With my amazing advance at Great Tower Street (Aunt Mabel declined to talk about me when she called, always turning conversation to the impending engagement of her elder daughter who, my aunt hoped, was going to do fairly well for herself and transfer the expense of her support from Peckham to Denmark Hill) and the prospects that everyone, excepting the lady delineator of character from hand-writing, prophesied for me, was it not convenient, and would it not be possible to give up the small general shop, with its mixture of odours and its jumble of stock, its chances of doubtful debts, and its constant demand for attention; sell the contents for what they were worth, and the goodwill for what it would fetch, and, taking courage in two pairs of hands, migrate to the southern side of New Cross Road?

“But have you the leastest idea, Henry, what the rents there run into?”

The question of rent had been examined. Twenty-eight pounds a year seemed a lot, but we might let one of the rooms if my mother felt so disposed. Let it to some young clerk, or some young woman engaged in the city, and the payment would help. I could guarantee sixteen shillings a week, which certainly left not a great margin for luxuries, but compensation would be awarded in the withdrawal of work, morning and night; it was possible to find some paying occupation for evening hours, such as looking after the books of some tradesman in Deptford, or acting as secretary to some public man at Lewisham.

"Don't want to see you work your finger to the bone, Henry. You're still of the age when a boy wants a certain amount of play. Besides, Len would help like a shot if we let him know."

Here I had to exact a promise. Len was making his own way in the world, and we ought not to hamper him in any manner. What I recommended was that we should charge ourselves with the task and responsibility of the removal, and then ask him to come down some Sunday afternoon, and watch his face when he discovered what had happened.

"It would be a lark," she admitted, with relish. "He'd enjoy the joke as much as we should. But I wish you were a trifle older."

Admitting that my years were few, I claimed possession of a wisdom beyond my age; only with an effort was information concealed regarding the understanding come to between Milly and myself. Mother, declaring at first that it was good enough for talk, but not sufficiently good for action, came after a few months to concede that there might be something in it; agreed later that I could give notice to the landlord and look out for a small poster announcing, "This Establishment to be Disposed Of," a bill not, however, to be fixed in the window until she gave the word.

Ensued, a careful searching by Milly for a house small but commodious, cheap but in a good road, and sometimes we went about the task together, feeling tremendously grown-up, and flattered to the uttermost heights when some tenant assumed we were about to make our first start in married life. We discovered a small house in a road which had the advantage in my view of beginning with large houses (which shows that I had something of the snob about me) a long narrow garden at the back, and at the front brick fields, and there the woman gave us a quantity of good advice on the wisdom of giving and taking, avoidance of the first row, toleration of each other's relatives, concession of a certain amount of freedom. The landlord promised to re-paper

the front room, and Milly and I pored over a giant volume, making a selection with great difficulty only to find that the presentable patterns had a price which made the landlord say, "You must think I'm a jay!" whilst the figures he was prepared to give belonged to patterns that gave a mid-Victorian scream. I think the experience aged us, and certainly it revealed the fact that house-keeping was not exactly the merry jest it had hitherto appeared.

"I'd like to ask advice of Len," I said.

"Has he invited you yet to see his rooms?"

"Milly," I cried, "that's a most unkind remark. You know as well as I do it's the one thing which is worrying me."

"Send him a note," she said, soothingly, "and say that you want to see him. I'll dictate it."

The letter certainly gave my brother no convenient means of escape, and in a week or two I received at Woodpecker Road a line from him—he was too wise to address it to the office—saying that he had been waiting for me to fix the evening; would the following Thursday fortnight be convenient for me to come to Osnaburgh Street. Eight o'clock; not evening dress. Mother said it was very kind and thoughtful of Len to give me so much time; she herself had always found the pleasures of anticipation more acute than those of realisation. Meanwhile nothing further was to be done about the house in Shardeloes Road for fear Len, finding the arrangements completed, should feel hurt and express annoyance at the omission to ask his advice, and to this I agreed, although it was hard at the time to brook anything like delay. At that period, if my mind once began to point, the interval that elapsed before securing the bird proved almost intolerable. A new shape in collars attracting my attention in the hosier's window of Walbrook, life seemed flat and dreary and grim until I had secured a couple; an advertisement of some newly invented liquid "Guaranteed to make the Hair wave Naturally" and I was restless, and almost sleepless until I procured a bottle. The keen impatience of youth finds parallel in the nerves of middle-age.



When the evening came, I found it a hard task to keep the information regarding my social engagement from the clerks at office. They recognised that something of a high and important nature was about to happen, and tried in several ways to extract information, first, by pretending they knew where I was going (which frightened) second, by declaring they had no anxiety whatsoever to be made acquainted with the facts (which annoyed). They were all good chaps and since the time I left the lowest rank, there had been no cause for complaint regarding their deportment; with at least three of them I was on such friendly terms that it seemed ill-mannered on my part to keep from them any secrets; assuredly they kept none from me. (I must have preserved reticence on other matters, or they would have resented my silence; they used to tell me of contention with parents, and give verbatim reports of discussions with girls; gaining nothing of equal value in return.) They allowed me to go at half-past six, begging me to give their united love to the lady; Mr Prentice who had been staying late left at the same time.

"You don't go my way, Mr Henry."

"I am going by omnibus, sir, from the Bank."

G. W. P. pulled at his chin thoughtfully. "A turn of exercise," he said, after deliberation, "will do me no harm." Then announcing it as though he were going to accompany me on a fortnight's walking tour, "I'll come with you as far as the Mansion House!"

He asked for my opinions concerning the political situation, taking the first subject offered by the newspaper placard and I ventured, with respect, to express my views concerning the action of Lord Randolph Churchill.

"Speaking of pushful young men," he interrupted, when we had been momentarily parted by the crowd on the pavement, "that fellow Drew is keeping quiet; I suppose he began to see he was going too far. For the last month or so, we've heard nothing of his proceedings. May have disappeared for all I know. 'What's become of Waring!'" Mr Prentice quoted.

I answered that the name was new to me. "You don't know your Browning, my lad. You ought to read your Browning. I owe a great deal to Browning. Browning has influenced me very considerably."

I put an adroit question, and before we parted he promised to give me a copy of his new book of poems with an autograph inscription; he said publishers were difficult people to deal with, but the coming volume had been arranged for on very advantageous terms; previously he had been called upon to pay £85, but by taking up a firm stand he induced them to accept this time £70, and he reckoned the bargain one that satisfied all parties. He showed me a new poem beginning,

"As I hold you in my arms, my dear,  
Your heart is fluttering 'gainst mine,"

and I ventured to point out that this with two people, standing face to face, was improbable; he admitted that there existed a difficulty unless one of the parties wore the heart on the right side.

"Good luck to you, my lad," he said, benevolently, in bidding good-bye. "Let me know if you hear anything of Drew."

The servant who opened the door told me Mr Drew was in, adding that I was a jolly sight too early; she, however, conducted me up to the second floor and showed me into a sitting-room with two windows, and, against the walls, comfortable chairs and couches; in the corner a writing-desk with a photograph of mother, taken in Blackheath days, and a photograph of myself in Highland costume and holding a toy gun. On the mantelpiece, portraits of three or four young women who appeared to have been caught by the camera in the act of what is called making eyes, one of Kitty Latham had an inscription scrawled just below the neck. At the side of the mirror cards bearing the words "Mrs So and So. At Home," and invitations to dinner with the Auld Lang Syne Club.

"Shan't be a minute!" cried the cheery voice of Len from the other room.

A scent of yesterday's cigars in the room ought to have made one feel inclined to open one of the windows, but only gave a highly agreeable suggestion of expensive living; the top of the pianoforte had the marks of two or three apparently ineradicable circles. Out in the road, the traffic going north and south rumbled pleasantly.

"Why, it's my own long lost brother," cried Len, fixing his tie as he came in. "How are you, little man? Sit down and make yourself comfortable. Pull up that easy-chair and tell me all the news. Upon my word, I'm awfully glad to see you again: been looking forward to this meeting for weeks and weeks. Anything happened since I saw you last? How's old G. W. P.? I suppose," going on rapidly as a knock came to the front door below, "he thinks he has a grievance against me; he'll certainly think so when I launch my bomb-shell to-morrow. I'm going to blow some of the dust off you chaps in Great Tower Street to-morrow with any luck. Lord, what a rattling good game life is, to be sure. What, my old friend Murcell?" to the newcomer with enthusiasm. "Come in, my sprig of English nobility, and let me introduce you to my young brother. The infant prodigy. The hope of the family. Our bright particular star. Our ten o'clock turn."

Six or seven entered soon afterwards, all rather heavy about the eyes, and all begging for immediate refreshment, and I sat watching them eagerly, listening to everything they talked about, and not always able to follow the trend of their remarks. Two, when they had tired of the task of chaffing the others, turned their attention to me, but Len interposed and they reluctantly stopped. There was, I remember, a good deal of talk about women; now and again Len diverted this to another topic; it seemed to me that, if the evening had a fault, there was rather too much filling up of glasses. Good though to observe that Len kept his head clear; it appeared he was able to take a fair amount without giving the signals of excess shown by the others. Altogether a splendid, grown-up evening for me; one that widened my

outlook, one for which I heartily and earnestly thanked Len when in going at half past-ten, I took my walking-stick from a guest who was imitating musical instruments.

"Come again," he said, hospitably. "And be sure to give my love to mother. How is she? Forgot to ask. You can find your way downstairs, can't you?" I begged him not to think of leaving his guests. "Fact is," he said, confidentially, "they'll be up to some ridiculous practical joke if I turn my back for long. An amusing set; they'd think nothing later on of throwing the furniture out of the windows if I were not there to stop them!"

In Great Tower Street at about twelve the next day, G. W. P. came from his room and I knew the bomb-shell had exploded. He had to stop himself for a moment because my friend Ernest Fowler called at the counter and asked whether Mr Drew was in. Mr Prentice striding forward took upon himself the task of giving a vehement reply to the question. Ernest explained it was not Mr Leonard Drew but Mr Henry Drew he required; the one known here, as he just recollected, under the name of Mr Henry.

Twenty minutes later, I found myself drummed out of Great Tower Street with ignominy.



## CHAPTER VII

### LEN CALLS ON US

**M**Y mother, always plucky and determined in the presence of disaster, and only depressed when prospects seemed bright, assured me a great load had been taken from her mind ; admitted she had failed to get rid of the impression that the moment she left the shop in Woodpecker Road, something of a serious nature would happen. With her sister, who came over from Peckham to announce that the eldest daughter had secured the desired young man, and had received the engagement ring—

“He can’t back out of it now,” remarked my aunt, triumphantly.

—With her, my mother found it necessary to take up an attitude of definite opposition, declaring she could not recall the occasion when the other foretold that I should only remain at Great Tower Street long enough to turn my cuffs, although my aunt described with much apparent accuracy the exact spot in the room which she occupied when making the prediction, the position of those about at the time. We both opposed her later when she argued there was no excuse for blaming Len ; as we pointed out, with a good deal of warmth, such an idea had not come within a hundred miles of our thoughts. Len was perfectly innocent in the matter. No one would be more perturbed than Len when he came to hear about it ; ours was to be the duty to keep the news from him as long as possible. My aunt went, after giving a broad hint to the effect that if we really wanted to give her elder girl a wedding present, an eider-down quilt would be as useful as anything.

There was no time to be wasted. Necessary to set about immediately upon the task of finding a new situation, even for no other reason than to escape the satire of Mrs Croucher; the apologies of Ernest Fowler (who urged me to believe that he had blundered unintentionally, declaring it a mistake that anyone might have committed, and begging it should not be looked upon as betokening want of general intelligence), the sympathy of my mother. Milly snipped from her father's newspaper each evening the likely offers and those less than likely, from advertisements to all who wished to earn £3 a week easily, and in a refined manner—these were commonly from jewellery firms at Birmingham and led to no satisfactory result—to vacancies for sub-editors on a provincial daily journal. Having done what was required of me in the shop, I occasionally walked swiftly up my old route to the City, and called at some of the chosen addresses, hurrying from one to the other with such feverish haste in my anxiety to lose no time that the leisurely advertisers who wanted a premium or a sum invested in their concerns must have thought me slightly demented. Milly always met me near Old Kent Road station at a time appointed with a fresh collection of cuttings.

Unable to endure any longer the disappointments, I resolved one evening to go up to see Len and, explaining the situation—or want of it—to ask for influence and assistance. It was a shame to trouble the dear chap, and I particularly desired not to be a drag on him, but this step would certainly have been taken if I had not by chance met Kitty Latham in Lewisham High Road.

"Don't go this evening," she said, at once. "He's engaged this evening, and he won't want to be bothered with callers."

"Should be very careful not to bother him."

"I'm going up to town," she remarked. "Supposing by chance I run across him."

"That isn't likely."

"But if I should do so, shall I mention it to him and ask whether he could do anything? By the bye, do you know shorthand, and can you draw at all?"

I did not know shorthand, I could draw a little; my manner conveyed no keen desire to extend knowledge.

"Instead of going up to town," she said, stopping, "call at this place and start taking lessons. I'll pay the fees."

"You'll do nothing of the kind."

"You may as well let me," she contended. "Father gives me money when I ask for it."

The refusal was repeated definitely.

"That reminds me," she went on, accepting my decision, "why not call and see father?"

"Did that once, and I'm not likely to do it again."

"Don't be so ill-tempered," she commanded, pinching my ear. I begged her to cease. "Because you've had a whack from one person, you want to quarrel with everybody. Do as I tell you, like a good little boy. It may lead to something. As a matter of fact there is a vacancy."

"I'd a jolly sight rather go up to the City again."

"And the City would apparently a jolly sight rather do without you. Remember, you're going to start on these classes this evening. Call to-morrow night and," looking at her parasol interestedly, "there's something you might do for me. You can mention casually that I called on you and your mother, and spent two or three hours. I don't want him to think that we walked about chatting in the main thoroughfare like this. Father is so particular."

Milly, when I told her of this encounter, pressed her under-lip thoughtfully and I attributed the advice she gave to the antagonism always exhibited towards the Latham girl. I argued that one should speak of people as one found them; no sort of prejudice should be allowed to interfere; if folk behaved well to me I thought well of them; the greatest blunders had been committed as a result of unreasoning animosity. All the same on calling the next

night at the house and offices in Hatcham, I found myself, in walking up and down to fill out the time, suddenly deciding to adopt Milly's counsel.

"Hullo, here's His Nibs," exclaimed Mr Latham, when Emily, the maid, announced my arrival. "Thought you'd emigrated. What do you want? What are you after?" In his shirt sleeves, he was smoking, and wore a card-board cap like to those that carpenters held fashionable in the sixties. "Got quite enough to worry me, recollect that!"

"How's business?" I asked, familiarly.

"Business," he replied, sinking carefully into a springless leather chair, "might be better, and couldn't be worse."

"Things seem to be looking up in the City."

"You got a berth there, did you, after all. Hope you'll keep it. I'll tell you what's ruining my trade, and that is——"

"Drink!" I said. He stared at me and taking the cigar from his lips, placed it carefully on the mantelpiece. "Drink's ruining your trade. Apart from the money it costs you, it makes you fuddled at night and stupid in the morning."

"Always know when I ought to stop," he growled.

"But that doesn't make you stop."

"Look here," said Mr Latham, restively, "I don't allow anyone but my girl to talk to me in this way, and she has to pick and choose her time pretty cautiously. Moreover, the next time she tries it on I've got an answer for her. Close on twelve before she come in last night, and it's no use you telling me that's proper behaviour for a girl of eighteen, because I know better. If her poor mother was alive——"

"Forget the exact time I said good-bye to her, but I know it was pretty late."

Mr Latham took up his cigar and lighted it between the bars of the grate. "If she was with His Nibs," he said, to the fire, "that's different. I've got the responsibility of



her. If anything mis-happened to her, I should—I should give it all up.”

“The drink?”

“Leave off harping on that,” he ordered, explosively. “It’s the only hobby I’ve got. Might do a lot of things worse. It’s an amiable weakness, after all.”

“I’m in the midst of it day after day,” I remarked. “The scent of it’s around me from morning till night, and perhaps I get too tired of it to be a fair judge.”

“That’s where I ought to have been,” he remarked. “Living here amongst paste and brushes, why naturally enough when I want recreation I fly to something stronger. And mind you, there’s no telling where I should have been without it.”

“That’s true!”

“Ah,” he exclaimed, jovially; “knew I should get the best of you in argument. Now, draw your chair up, and let’s have a comfortable chat, and put all personalities at one side. That’s what I always say at the meeting of the Board of Guardians; no personalities. Once you begin on them you lose sight of the main question. Tell us what this office of yours is like. Do they have samples all over the place? Does the firm open a fresh bottle when a good customer calls?”

It is to be hoped that a line will be drawn hereafter between harmless exaggeration and malicious inaccuracy; certainly I, that evening, made liberal use of the first. Mr Latham was particularly gratified with the instance of a client in Hertfordshire who returned, with a severe letter of complaint, a consignment of hock, and the bottles being repacked in fresh cases, and a new bottle taking the place of the one which had been opened, thanked us, in proper terms, for attention, and accepted our apology for the inexcusable blunder, adding that he owned a palate which he flattered himself had never yet failed him in time of need. Mr Latham was so pleased with this that I fear I capped it with an invented circumstance, and he reciprocated

cated with one or two self-congratulatory references to sharp practice on his own part, referring with special pride to an accident to one of his posting stations where he obtained, on threat of legal proceedings, full compensation from two separate and distinct parties.

"I've lost my right hand, though," he added, regretfully, "and the widow's pestering me to do something for herself and the children, but," with energy, "I jolly well shan't. I paid him his market value when he was alive, and he ought to have put by like the rest of us."

"Was he a good man?"

"First class! He could write my letters for me; he could go out and swear fairly well at the chaps if they wanted it; I could lend him my frock-coat, and he'd call on a firm and behave himself so that they couldn't tell but what he was a gentleman. He was really better at that game than I am myself. I can mix among ordinary people, as you may say, and hold my own, but once I get into the society of toffs I begin to lose 'eart somehow. Let them ride rough-shod over me. There's a young swell in a soap firm; he's had what they call a University education, and I can no more——"

"Give the widow something," I said. "Give her a lump sum down, and get a receipt in full. Point out that she has no claim on you, and give her twenty-five pounds."

"You're like most," he grumbled. "You enjoy giving other people's money away."

"You'll get a cheaper man in his place. Could he write shorthand?" Mr Latham shook his head. "See that the new one can write shorthand. It's a great help in office work."

"How does it act?"

I found pen, ink, and paper on the sideboard, and commanded him to dictate a letter. Mr Latham closed his eyes and obeyed. I made some of the elementary curves and dashes learnt but the night before,

and told my brain to store carefully the purport of the note.

"Marvellous!" he exclaimed, gazing at the communication, fairly written out. "Whatever will they go inventing of next! And fancy a bit of a chap like His Nibs having it all at his fingers' end."

"Would you like to see the same letter written out in French?" I asked.

"It'd be somewhat of a joke."

A Paris firm might not have been able to comprehend fully the meaning of the communication, but the beginning was correct—"J'ai l'honneur de vous informer—" and the end was clear enough—"Agreez, messieurs, l'assurance de ma considération distinguée."

"A knock-out," he admitted, gazing at it respectfully. "And do you mean to tell me this is the way a Frenchman would write that letter? Well, well," he said, "they're a queer lot. What I mean to say is, they might just as well fall into line and adopt our methods, instead of putting themselves to the trouble of learning a— What does *aujourd'hui* mean? To-day, eh? Well now, see how much simpler and shorter we put it."

I was fearing Milly's plan might not prove successful, and had almost decided to change and make an appeal, when Mr Latham asked how much the firm in Great Tower Street paid me.

"That's a tidy screw," he remarked.

I said the general opinion seemed to be that I was worth more.

"An article's worth what it fetches," he conceded. "Ever thought about making a change?"

"Shouldn't do anything without taking my brother's advice."

"What sort of a chap is he?"

I was on my own subject here, and talked with enthusiasm about Len for twenty minutes by the clock. Mr Latham interrupted by asking whether Len happened to be out of

a berth ; I laughed so much at the inquiry, that he excused himself for putting the question on the grounds that something had flashed through his mind.

"As for you," he said, "you stay where you are, and you do your best for your employers. Don't you go in for the rolling-stone business. Any man who's sitting in an easy-chair is a fool to get up out of it."

"Quite agree with you, Mr Latham. Your clock right?"

"Don't be in a hurry," he begged. "I'm giving you good advice. If people come and tempt you with offers of a bigger salary, don't go falling into the trap. A morsel of toasted cheese won't last for ever."

"Remember me to Kitty," I said, rising. "Tell her I called."

"Now, now !" he urged, also rising. "Let's begin talking plain to each other. I'm a bit of a globe-trotter—had to go to West Drayton only yesterday—and I've always found that wherever you may be, straightforward language is the best. I'm going to put a question to you, and I want an answer—yes or no. Will you give up your present employment and come here and be my head cook and bottle-washer, as you may say, for fourteen shillings a week?"

"No !"

"Fifteen?"

"No !"

"Sixteen-and-six?"

"No !"

"Look here," said Mr Latham, irritated, "you seem to have a fairly good idea of your own importance. Name your own figure and give me a chance of thinking it over for a week or two."

"If I name my own figure," trying to keep my voice steady and resolute, "I shall want an answer now before your clock strikes the half-hour."

"Go on then !"



I mentioned a sum, and crying "Goo' gracious!" he conducted me to the front door. This was almost my first essay in the game of bluff, and even now it is difficult for me to understand why I did not break down on the steps and say, "Oh Mr Latham, I've only been pretending, do give me something to do, and I don't mind what you pay me!" Instead, I turned up the collar of my overcoat, bade him good-night, and went.

"Boy!" His voice came as I, crossing the road, was formulating the bitter phrases of reproach to be used to Milly when we next met.

"Yes, Mr Latham."

His card-board cap blew off and I returned it.

"Sure you can't take less?"

"Quite sure!"

"Then we'll call it a bargain," he said, reluctantly. "Call it a bargain," offering his hand, "and if you don't suit me, I shall out you before you can say Jack Robinson!"

A month or two later my brother paid a swift visit to see us in the new house in Shardeloes Road, approved everything, told my mother she was looking absolutely girlish, said a gracious word to the two City warehouse ladies for whom we provided bed and breakfast, told me he heard old Latham was satisfied, ran off to catch a train back to town.

"My Len!" said mother, happily.

"Our Len!" I said.

Len never had any fear about getting on in the world, and it is certain we had no doubts concerning him. I cannot recall that at the time he ever spoke of himself in any tones but those of perfect confidence, and this, which would have been, in any one else, instantly resented, was accepted. A hint from Ernest Fowler that he intended some day to make the attempt to succeed in literature drew from me severe warnings and ridicule; even his sister was not allowed to speculate too hopefully concerning the future without receiving an imperative instruction to

touch wood. In my own case, there was the case of Buckmaster. Ernest wanted to write a short story about the sixties, and requested me to look up the period, and to furnish him with a few details outside his personal knowledge. I found in a library at the back of a Berlin wool-shop in Queen's Road, on shelves mainly filled with old three-volume novels tied in sets with stay-laces, and bearing stimulating titles such as "The Dashing Miss Courthope," and "Why Did He Do It?" the very book with a quantity of information concerning what it frankly called fast life. There, amongst the author's experiences of the King and Heenan prize fight, with golden youths paying a guinea at London Bridge for return tickets that bore no destination, dodging from one county to the borders of another, and a picture of Mr Heenan as he appeared at the end of the struggle, I found many partially veiled references, one relating to dear old Harry B—km—s—r, the brightest dare-devil of all. Further on was what the author called a most diverting incident at Cremorne, where the admirable Harry had started—for no apparent reason—a terrific riot, finishing, so far as he was concerned, by knocking a policeman senseless, near Chelsea Hospital, taking the coat and top hat, and conveying the policeman to the nearest station to be charged with disorderly conduct, and interfering with the police in the performance of their duty. The humour of the various situations did not appeal to me, but I thought it would interest Buckmaster to see a name identical with his own in print.

"That's me!" said the old chap, setting down his paste-pot and brushes. "Needn't let it go any further, Mr Henry, but it's me that's referred to."

"In which case," I remarked, incredulously, "you can tell me perhaps who is meant by the reference to the Marquis of H."

"Knew him better than I know you."

"And the Blue Posts, and Barnes's, and Barrons Oyster Rooms."

"Wish I was there now."

"Evans's?"

"Evans's was a bit dull," said the old man. He turned over the pages and found an illustration. "There," he cried, excitedly. "Now, perhaps you'll take my word for it. I recollect, I do, when that was done. I recollect the young artist chap coming into the place and doing of it." He found, with trembling hands, his spectacle-case. "There am I," his voice quavered into shrillness. "That's meant for me. Waltzing round with Lardy Wilson. Like me too, as I was then. Not," he added, turning away and gazing at the almanacs on the walls, "not as I am now, Mr Henry."

Old Buckmaster brought one or two documents to prove the truth of his assertion, and I was forced to admit that here, in one of our least capable old hands, was a man who in his day had, as he put it, fluttered with the best. With a good deal of trouble, I induced him to allow Ernest to share the confidences, and Ernest received good value for the five shillings handed over; to me, the disconcerting fact was exhibited that one might be, at a certain time, near to the very top (Buckmaster's proudest memory was that Royalty had once slapped him on the back and he very nearly reciprocated), and, at another time, carry a ladder and fix bills concerning the marvellous value of Bigden's Guinea Overcoatings. Knowledge of my father's disaster was impressed by this case of Buckmaster's; it seemed that the world was like my old toy kaleidoscope with some one giving it, every now and then, a frolicsome shake. Buckmaster did not complain. He said, quite candidly, that he had had his fling and enjoyed it at the time; declared that if he had his life to live over again, he didn't know that he would care to make it different. As for the come-down, that was to be expected. He counted himself more fortunate than many of his contemporaries in that he was still alive. His advice to Ernest and to me at the conclusion of our talks never varied.

"Enjoy yourselves whilst you're young," said the unreformed old fellow. "When you're old, you won't have the chance."

I envied, more than ever, the fine and complete assurance of my brother Len.



## CHAPTER VIII

### AN IMITATION OF LEN

NOW that you see me arrived at a settled position under my own name, escaped from the scent and surroundings of the general shop in Woodpecker Road, and entered upon a life which did not keep me always glued to a high stool, comes opportunity to tell more about Len. At the first visit to Osnaburgh Street, I had been too much dazzled by the exuberant manners of his friends to bear myself with ease, and a lurking fear possessed me that one would not be asked again; of this there would be no sound reason for complaint, for Len had a perfect right to choose his own friends, and if I did not come up to the required standard, why so much the worse for me. When, at Latham's, I had half an hour to myself, I sometimes wrote out all that could be recollected of the remarks made on that first evening, and against these placed several answers which did not occur to me at the time. For instance, one said, "Excuse me, but are you a member of Parliament?" and the answer I gave, reddening, was "No." Here then was a retort to be improved.

1. Not at present.
2. Afraid the place is rather over-crowded with talent already.
3. Have you a borough in your pocket?
4. This is a very flattering invitation, but you must give me time to think it over.
5. No, but I always have my hair cut on a Friday evening.

None of these studied efforts approached in merit to the answer Len would have rapped out on the instant, and it

seemed obvious that the likelihood of receiving the same inquiry again was small, but it was surely wise to practise. I very much wished that at some place similar to the one in Lewisham High Road, where a patient bank clerk with a long family took trouble to encourage me over the earlier hedges of shorthand, and an elderly artist taught freehand drawing, one could find a School of Repartee; the accomplishment seemed so much more useful than any other. I did propose to Ernest Fowler that we should, in our evening walks through Loampit Vale and Catford and back by way of Forest Hill, take up the task, but Ernest possessed the serious mind, and any adventure into raillery or fanciful conversation was arrested at once with a "Yes but, surely you don't mean that!" and the experiments had to be relinquished. No doubt I assumed the manner of Len and his friends very clumsily, but my companion would have been equally difficult if one had done it well. With Kitty Latham there was better opportunity, and sometimes when she beat me at the game, I challenged the originality of some retort, asserting she had borrowed it from Len.

"You're always thinking of him," she said.

"And so are you!" Kitty was silent. "Why don't you ask him down here one evening?"

"He wouldn't come all this way."

"Try him and find out. Tell him you're asking me."

She was able a few days afterwards to inform me delightedly that her father said he had no objection to meeting the young fellow of whom he heard a great deal; she had written to Len enclosing a paid telegram form. The message came in the course of the afternoon at a moment when I looked in at the house on the expectation of finding a wire from the local theatre; the messenger boy wanting to know whether there was any answer. I opened it, without looking at the address.

"It's all right," calling up the staircase in going into the office. "He can manage to come."

She came flying down. "Where's the telegram?" she demanded, breathlessly.

"Just thrown it in the fire. It only said, 'Charmed to be with you.' Suppose you haven't seen anything of a business wire from——"

To my astonishment, Kitty shook me. "How dare you!" she cried, exasperatedly. "What do you mean by opening a communication addressed to me? If I were a man, I'd hit you."

It did not matter whether the communication was in his handwriting or not; it came from him and therefore she desired to preserve it. I contrived to mollify her by promising to go to the office and pay for a repetition of the message, on the excuse that it was feared some inaccuracy had crept in.

"Thank you, Henry!"

"But why in the world," I said, "should you put yourself into such a state of excitement over nothing at all?"

"Can't you see," she cried, impetuously, "that I'm head over heels in love with him?"

It gave me a shock at first, and, having to go by train to Sydenham, there was no time to give the matter consideration, but before leaving that night, I asked Kitty to walk part of the way with me, and told her the engagement had my complete approval. She protested it was not an engagement; assured me she did not yet feel quite certain that her affection was fully reciprocated, and bound me to secrecy. Half the fun, said Kitty, now restored to her usual vivacious manner, half the fun consisted in not letting people know; I was to breathe no word to Len, or to any other human being. I said she would make a capital young wife, just the right companion for Len. She took my hand and kissed it.

"Shall call you 'little brother-in-law,'" she whispered, "when there's no one listening."

Len came down rather late on the evening appointed, and Kitty and I were nervous about this, for Mr Latham had a

strong objection to anything like delay with meals. Indeed he was becoming restive, had taken two appetisers, as he called them, and was giving signs of talkativeness ere Len arrived; the moment my brother came Mr Latham found himself like the rest, impressed into something like silence. Before we sat down, Len discovered that lumbago was the subject on which Mr Latham wanted to converse. Len knew a man, an Honorable Mr Somebody, who suffered in precisely the same way, was caught at exactly the same place in the back that my stout master endeavoured to indicate; not fully acquainted with the remedy which the Honorable Mr Somebody took, would ascertain all the particulars; what Len did know was that the patient recovered in a perfectly marvellous manner, and had never a twinge since. Mr Latham, having prefaced his statement with the remark that he would willingly give a hundred and fifty pounds to any one who would cure him, now said he was prepared to go so far as one and a penny halfpenny, providing a guarantee could be given that one bottle would do the trick.

"A beautiful bird," exclaimed Len, as a new dish was brought in by the maid. "I know it's extremely bad manners to make a remark of that kind—" accepting the cut from the breast. "You have a most excellent cook!"

Mr Latham pointed with his fork at Kitty. "Begged me to let her make a start."

"No," cried Len. "Not really! Is that a fact, though? Mr Latham, your daughter is a treasure."

"I suppose," said my master, "once that gets known, some young burglar will come along and rob me of her. His Nibs here will be the first, I reckon."

"Father!"

"Capital," declared Len, amusedly. "Henry, you and I must at once obtain a jemmy and a dark lantern, and all the other necessary requisites. Reminds me of a story I heard the other day."

He told stories so extremely well that we could scarcely



understand how he managed to listen to Mr Latham's clumsily related and not always discreetly chosen anecdotes. When we saw one coming that we felt sure would not suit Len, Kitty and I intervened, but for the rest we listened to the conversation with our eyes on the visitor. He would not hear of Kitty leaving the room after supper was over; if Kitty had no objection to smoke she was to remain. Would she try a cigarette? Kitty glanced at her father, who said good-humouredly that he was not one of your old-fashioned sort, and she, accepting one from Len's case, pretended to be apprehensive, but all the same took a light from Len's cigarette, and I heard her ask whether it was a Muratti.

We went into the drawing-room and Kitty played. In turning over the pages of the music for her whenever she gave me a nudge, I, unable to keep my worshipping eyes from my brother, noticed that Len talked to Mr Latham, but did not commit the error of talking too much; offering all his attention to the other's arguments, sometimes not quite convinced at first, but giving in handsomely when Mr Latham became dogmatic.

"Can't play," said Kitty in an undertone to me, "when he's in the room."

"It's all right. He's talking to my brother."

"But I mean your brother."

Mr Latham said only for the fact that he was in his slippers, he would accompany Len to the station; moreover he found he had done something he could not recall having done for many a long year; he had, by oversight, forgotten his half past nine dose. I offered to go, and pointed out that the railway station was on my way, but Mr Latham, winking at me, remarked there was a matter of figures he wanted to talk over; if Kitty was not afraid of being seen with a young man, she might as well escort the visitor.

"Nice feller," declared Mr Latham, when they had gone. "Pleasant a chap as I've met for some considerable time. Very different from you, Henery!"

I admitted this freely.

"Can you guess what was passing through my mind as I sat here talking?" I mentioned that the impending bankruptcy of Mawson's was worrying him; he pushed this aside as a subject too small for present consideration. "Why shouldn't him and my girl make a match of it? She wants steadyding down a trifle; he's just the very one for her. I never make a mistake in my judgment of a man. Give me three minutes' conversation with a chap, and I can size him up pretty correctly, whoever he may be. Now, Henery, this wants tact. This wants artfulness, as you may say. This wants something different from what we use in managing the advertising business. We must throw them together, Henery, as much as possible. You must egg him on, and I'll egg her on. See?"

I thought it would be better not to interfere.

"That's where you're jolly well wrong," he declared, vehemently. "A bit of a lad like you can't be expected to know; you're just the same in business affairs."

I tried to remind him of one or two cases where my advice had been sound and good, but he would not tolerate interruption. Agreeing it would be unwise to show all our cards, he, for his part, intended at first to say words depreciating Len and hinting at no anxiety to see him again; in dealing with the female heart, he assured me, you had always to keep in mind the important fact that it liked to find out a martyr and make a fuss over him. He failed to understand why I did not see the question in the same light; was I perhaps slightly gone on the girl myself?

"Very well then," he said, contentedly. "We'll see what we can do in the way of being matrimonial agents. Won't you have one with me before you go, Henery? Not just a taster? I don't like sipping alone, but if I can't get no one else to join me, what am I to do? If ever you get on in the world, my lad, which I don't suppose you ever will—your brother's different—you'll find that one of the greatest drawbacks is in not being able to turn

into any public-house you 'appen to be near, and call for what you want, stand treat to a friend, and perhaps," Mr Latham began to search on the carpet for no obvious reason, "perhaps exchange a lively word or two with the lady on the other side of the counter. Mixing with all sorts of society, they naturally make animated company, as you may say. Fit to go anywhere, and be anywhere, and talk anywhere! I don't care who says the contrary," with sudden truculence. "I m'ntain that the work at a public bar makes a woman good company. Good company that's what it makes her! And the fact that she's been married before is all in her favour."

I tried to speak of one or two matters of business, of the necessity of beginning to make preparations for the bean-feast of which the men were talking, but he would not discuss any other subject but that of love, and love between Milly Fowler and myself was of course interesting to me, but love in the general, and as seen through the slightly bemused eyes of Mr Latham, did not completely engage my attention. He declined to allow me to go until Kitty returned, and in the meantime endeavoured to explain to me how love affected a man, causing him to think of one lady and one lady alone, making him say to himself a thousand times a day, "Where is she now, I wonder, and what is she doing of?" sometimes affecting one to such an extent that one felt compelled to walk perhaps miles in order to get a glimpse of her. I assured him I perfectly understood, but he would not have this, declaring that a man had to reach the age of forty-six ere real love came to him; anything before that could be counted as boyish weakness. Mr Latham told me of his first wife, whom he referred to as a bit racketty in early days, but settling down wonderfully after Kitty arrived; you would scarcely have thought her the same woman. A pity she had not lived longer to watch Kitty, but these things were pre-ordained, and it was not for us to question the management of the world.

One great advantage to me in the new procedure was that I saw more of Len than formerly, had better opportunities for conversation with him and for imitating his deportment. No ingenuity was required from Mr Latham or myself to clinch the friendship; Kitty told me in confidence that it was a great relief to her to have everything fair and above board. I took her daily letter to post every morning; Len did not reply to these, and she explained that it was understood that he, a busy man, should not be expected to write, and she felt contented with the one-sided correspondence. Once when Len had called the previous evening, I asked her what she found to write about.

"Found to write about?" she repeated, dreamily. "You don't understand, you don't understand. Why, I could be writing to him all day long!"

"Of course, Len is an exceptional man!"

"There can't be anyone else like him in the whole world. I wish I could tell you, I wish I could tell him—Look," she exclaimed, showing me her eyes. "Crying. Crying, just out of sheer happiness!"

It seemed possible my efforts to model myself on Len were not too successful, for when at the Fowler's I, consciously or unconsciously, repeated his remarks in something like his voice and manner, I found myself detected and pulled up sharply by that candid household, and Mrs Fowler hinted it might become necessary to purchase a parrot-cage. Milly advised me to be myself and not attempt to become but partly myself, and partly some one else, contending it gave her no satisfaction to observe people laughing at me; I retorted warmly to the effect that when I was Henry Drew, she did not always give full approval; Milly argued that nobody could be considered perfect.

At home, in Shardeloes Road, the endeavours were received with greater approval. My mother would say—

"Why bless the boy, if he isn't getting wonderfully like his brother!"



And this gratified me, but I objected when called upon in the presence of the two ladies, whom mother called our boarders, to show them how Len moved his right arm when he talked of political matters. The two were inclined to treat me as a youth of seventeen and a half: they had not, I suppose, learnt that what seventeen and a half desires is to be treated as twenty-one, and becoming restive, I one night told my mother she had better give them notice to leave. It appears this course was, from a financial point of view, impossible; it was proved by figures that the house could not be run without the help afforded by the weekly rent they paid. To which argument I said some other remedy would have to be found. When a man came home at night, tired after a day's work, and anxious to pursue his studies, a man wanted, above everything else, peace and quietness; two cackling, chattering females were certainly not desired.

"Now do be sensible, Henry!"

That I, contributing so much to the up-keep of the house, should not only find my counsel discarded, but that I should be called upon to receive counsel, and counsel of a superfluous nature, was surely beyond the limits of human endurance. I had had about enough of it, and if my mother found no suggestion to make I was prepared to submit, as an alternative to my first recommendation, another scheme; she listened with eyes on her needlework as I, walking up and down the kitchen, proceeded to describe it. The weekly sum which Len had arranged to pay when he left home, I too was willing to pay; with the remainder of my salary a room could be taken nearer London in a position not perhaps convenient for my work, but this (speaking with the air of a martyr at Smithfield) I felt willing to endure. Having no desire to talk harshly, one felt bound to point out that few would have been inclined to put up with it for so long. I was old enough now to look after myself, and what I wanted was more space, more freedom, more time, more of everything.

"You do as you think proper, Henry!"

Prepared for opposition, and furnished with a stock of arguments, this took me aback. I had to change my attitude, pointing out one or two objections to the proposal; her loneliness, the necessity for increasing the number of boarders, the extra work entailed; my mother kept her head down, and repeated—

“You do as you think proper, Henry!”

A lively description given to me by Kitty Latham of an evening at Len's rooms, to which ladies had been invited, encouraged me to go on with the scheme; I could never hope to become my brother's equal until I cut myself away from the cramping ties and knots of home. I, too, wanted to entertain; I, too, wanted to get a circle of friends about me. The party had, it seemed, been one of special brilliancy with a young man whose name I had seen in the papers; everyone in evening dress, and some of the ladies, according to Kitty's opinion, in not quite enough. It was perturbing to think Len had not asked me, and, once settled down, my first endeavour would have to be in the direction of purchasing a suit of dress clothes, the absence of which ruled one out of polite and interesting society.

The assistance of Milly in choosing a room, though greatly required, was nevertheless dispensed with, and I started on the task alone. Near Great Dover Street seemed an ideal situation, and there was choice of two squares. Along the three sides of Merrick Square I went as though canvassing for votes; being, in fact (owing probably to my youth), taken for nearly everything but an intending resident; one determined woman, at a house where I made the ring of the bell a shade too important, called out from a top window that if she caught me at the game on a future occasion, she would give herself the trouble of calling round and seeing the head master, and I could let her know how I liked the consequences. A furnished room was wanted, and views of landladies concerning the articles did not always coincide with mine; the more aged and decrepit the sofa and chairs, the more enthusiastic the owners proved.

"Supposing new springs was put in, why they'd only be broke again, so, as I say, what's the use? Why the last gentleman who had this room, he objected at first, but I said, 'Oh, you'll get used to it!' and he did, too, and he'd be here now only, poor fellow, some girl snapped him up."

They had a confusing habit of turning the tables on me, so that, in asking questions, I found myself called upon to answer questions. Why was I leaving home; was I any relation to Drew who used to keep a shop in Newington Butts; what did I earn a week and should I expect to be waited on hand and foot; was my mother troubled with rheumatism; what did I think of the goings-on of these Irishmen in the House of Commons; did I keep good hours, and what chapel or church did I attend? Eventually, I found a small top room at the back that had a sloping ceiling, which the landlady declared to be no disadvantage to one of my moderate stature—"It'll learn you to be careful," she asserted—and a look-out which appeared to me to command a view of only a desolate yard; she urged me not to criticise this until the fine weather came round. I paid a week's rent in advance, and the woman said something told her I was a perfect little gentleman.

"Is it this evening you're going, then?" asked my mother, with some astonishment. "All right, only I didn't know you had decided. Everything packed and ready for the van to call to-morrow? Well then," looking cheerfully around, "there's nothing to do except to say good-bye."

"Good-bye, mother."

"Good-bye, Henry. Come and see me as often as you can. Because with Len gone, and you gone, why——"

"I shall look in very often and see how you're getting on. And I'll ask Milly to come round sometimes, and keep you company."

"That's good," she said, and kissed me.

I had scarcely reached the bend of the road, when finding in a pocket the latch-key, I ran back with it, opening the door and letting myself in.

"Recollected just in time that—— Why, what's the matter?" She was resting near the deal table; her back trembling; I put my arm around her neck. "What's the matter, mummy? Don't you want me to leave you?" She could not answer and I knelt down beside her. "Tell me which you'd rather I did, and I'll do it. Stop or go?"

"Go!" she whispered through her tears.

"Then," definitely, knowing she did not mean this, "I shall stop."

I have found life on retrospection similar to a Continental trip, viewed from the same distance. At the time, a generous sprinkling of worry and anxiety; trouble in making oneself understood and in understanding other people; detrimental fellow passengers, with complete indifference on the part of those who ought to be active. Conveyances over-heated; difficulties in regard to sitting accommodation. Frequent arguments over the inspecting of tickets. A sigh of intense relief on the part of all when the journey came to end. But memory of irritants never lasts very long; a few days of interval and they are forgotten; only the pleasing circumstances remain. Similarly I can pick out the days of my youth that were specially joyous, whilst those which intervened have left no impression.

In particular, there comes to me with every detail, a day in Surrey. I managed to get passes from the advertising department of the South Western Railway for Henry Drew, Esquire and one; the intention being to take my mother. Len, asked to give approval to this scheme, went further, and declared it would be an easy matter for him to obtain leave for the day, upon which my mother, without hesitation, resigned good-humouredly, and sent us off in the morning with a newspaper parcel of sandwiches which Len pitched out of the window near Vauxhall.

"Nothing looks worse," he explained, "than to see a well-dressed man carrying a parcel."

We sang on the way down (I have never found my voice



sound anywhere so admirably as in a railway carriage) and he told me some capital anecdotes in regard to which my only regret was that I did not know anyone, but old Latham, to whom they could be repeated. The guard of the train, at first on the defensive, became, at each stopping-place, more and more the slave of Len, and at our destination, begged and entreated we should catch the six-thirteen back, for that would be the return train of which he took charge. We went across a large common in the direction of the village, and played about on the way as though we were boys again, challenging each other to races, and to jumping; finally we tried the old wheelbarrow form of progress. Len, as driver, dropped my ancles suddenly when two young women who were blackberrying came in sight; leaving me to regain dignity as well as I could, he went forward and politely assisted in releasing one from the brambles. Were we, might he ask, far from the village? They answered that a short-cut existed, discovered by them but a day previously, which would take us there in less than twenty minutes; they were, in fact, returning by that route. Would it be too much to ask that they should take the trouble to act as guides? No trouble at all, but a pleasure.

"Exceedingly kind of you," declared Len, with the easy manner that I always envied.

We walked abreast until a narrow path between bushes compelled us to divide, and then, as Len escorted the prettier girl, I found my natural awkwardness became more apparent than usual. For one thing, I was in love with Milly Fowler, and to speak to any other young woman in tones of even ordinary courtesy seemed to me then, disloyal. Len and his companion soon reached the stage of good terms, and when she espied nuts, he ordered me to devise some means of pulling down the branches; the nuts secured, I handed them to him and he presented them to the lady. They told us of a cricket match to be played that afternoon; this constituted it appeared the first real incident of their stay in the country. The item of information led to others. Engaged in the same

place of business in Berners Street, Oxford Street, they had resolved for months to take their holiday together and to take it right away from all the clatter and turmoil of town; the result of the experiment had not been entirely satisfactory—

“I didn’t begin the row, Ethel.”

“Don’t be so silly, Janie. You know very well who started it.”

—And the first morning had exhausted the attractions of neighbourhood.

“You’ll be all right now,” remarked Len.

“Does that mean you are going to stay on for several days?” asked Ethel.

“How do you think we can possibly leave until you are gone?”

They were to have lunch at one o’clock at the cottage where they were staying, and did not make any attempt to hide satisfaction when my brother fixed an hour and a place for meeting afterwards. We went on to the inn, and there the preparations for an evening meal for the two teams would have defied anyone but Len; he found the proprietress who, declaring distractedly that her brain was giving way, consented nevertheless to see what could be done in the way of mutton chops.

“Now, what do you say?” he asked, over the rice pudding. “Shall we stay here and see the game, or shall we go for a long walk?”

“But we promised to meet them.”

“That don’t matter,” he said, lightly.

A rare, an exceptional afternoon. The visiting folk were one short, and Len very kindly waived claims of seniority and allowed me to fill the vacancy. I could see him whilst I was fielding, the object of adoration on the part of the two London girls; later when the chance came to do some batting, I observed that his audience had increased, and I felt happy in knowing that Len was enjoying himself; he always appeared at his best with a good circle around him. When I was run out, by the stupidity of a youth who looked

like a butcher, and behaved as a lunatic, something that Len said, as I returned to the tent, gained a roar of laughter.

We gave the girls tea on the lawn at the back of a small house which advertised its willingness to provide refreshments by a coy notice nearly hidden in the window by fuschias, and my brother mapped out picnics and expeditions for several days ahead. They took little or no notice of me, and I sat back, listening to him and wondering, and worshipping.

"Let me see," he said, looking at his watch, "we ought to inquire about rooms."

We left them outside the cottage with a full and precise arrangement for meeting on the following morning. I had begun to expostulate with him as we walked away, when he suddenly left me. Returning, he mentioned that neither of them knew how to kiss, and turning the conversation, made no further reference to the two damsels, but began to reckon up disbursements of the day. It was wonderful, this ability of his, to dismiss a subject; I often thought that his mind had a number of compartments, upon any of which he could, at will, close the door.

In the following year I was a fellow traveller with the plain girl in a Bayswater omnibus, and her pretended failure to recognise me made the brief journey the longest I can remember. Still, the day was one spent in the good company of Len, and for that reason, worthy of record here.

## CHAPTER IX

### TWO MEETINGS WITH LEN

I BOUGHT a blank volume at the stationer's near Clifton Hill and began to collect newspaper references to Len. At first he sent some to me, consisting mainly of notices of public dinners and his name in the alphabetical list following the words, "Among others present were—" I discovered in a financial paper a report of a meeting where he fought some of the directors, with, at the start, calls of "Time!" from other shareholders, and "Shut up!" and various discouraging ejaculations, but these (so far as one could guess from the report) quietened down, and then came "Good, good," and "Cries of Bravo," and at the end "Loud and long continued cheering." I felt as proud of this as Len himself could have done; blamed myself for daring to blame him for not giving me a chance to show off my new evening-suit (I did wear it at the Fowler's in St Donatt's Road one night, holding a kind of private view, and compelled to walk around the room a dozen times that Milly and all could admire the excellent fit at the back). I wanted to bring home a bottle of paste, but my mother insisted she was entitled to a share in the task, and for each slip made a fresh lot of flour and water. I found her sometimes poring over the extracts which she must have learnt, as I had learnt, by heart; it constituted one volume to add to "Queechy" which hitherto constituted her only literature. Milly and I each read, and kept in hand, three serials in the magazines or weekly papers, and when we met for walks, a good deal of the time was taken up in reporting the advance made, announcing that Princess Olga had not yet been caught, that Gilbert Hathering had discovered the missing document in



a secret drawer at the back of his uncle's writing-desk, that Lady Muriel Garthorne, in pretending to be a governess, had been so fortunate as to engage the notice of a youth employed in the electrical works who, unless the reader was greatly mistaken, would prove to be none other than Sir Hugh, the man she was called upon to marry under her father's will. Milly proved cleverer than I, for she could remember details; I recall one evening when we were walking up Pepy's Hill, and she was giving a spirited extract, an old lady with a lace cap took the trouble to come out of her house and run after us, begging, in breathless tones, that we would stop quarrelling, give way to each other, and make it up.

It was not at the bean-feast of that year, but the one succeeding, that I found an admirable opportunity of being grateful to Len. I had not seen much of him; he and Kitty Latham quarrelled, and something she said about him prevented me from speaking to her for a month or two, but she was able to inform me they had met again, bye-gones were to be bye-gones, she admitted she had tried to fall in love with some one else and failed. I felt very glad Kitty behaved sensibly, and on the understanding that she withdrew the remark concerning Len, we resumed terms of friendship.

"You and I are going to be chums, little brother-in-law, she said, "whatever happens. Look at this brooch he gave me!"

Mr Latham declared, admitting that on the previous occasion he might have had just a drop too much before the time came, there existed no good excuse for the behaviour of the men, and he threatened to give up the outing altogether, but I pointed out to him that it was a diversion to which the men looked forward; reminded him of the tumultuous cheering which came when he sat down. Mr Latham said that, wanting to be popular, he had no desire to buy popularity; if, however, I considered the men were properly grateful, he would give them one more chance.

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"But Henery," he said, impressively, "understand this. You'll have to take it on this time."

"Take what on, sir?"

"The speechifying."

"But I—I've never tried anything of the kind!"

"Never too soon to make a start," he decided. "You have a go at it, and see how you get along. When the moment comes, I shall simply get up and say, 'Owing to me having a touch of a cold, I call upon my factotum, Mr Henery Drew, to speak a few words on my behalf.' Then," said Mr Latham, genially, "up jumps His Nibs and talks to them like a cheap jack!"

I rehearsed three separate and distinct speeches, with three separate and distinct manners, in regard to which Milly said that not one seemed to her to hit the exactly right note; I pointed out that our men were not nearly so difficult to please as were young women who stayed at home and helped their mother in St Donatt's Road, and did a little private dressmaking. I had nearly made up my mind to go to Len and ask for advice and help, when my mother announced to me one evening, that the lady next door informed her the name of Drew was mentioned in the local paper, and I flew to the Broadway to buy a copy of the *Kentish Mercury*. "Mr Leonard Drew," said the newspaper, under the heading of Personal, "will be amongst the speakers at the meeting already announced for Wednesday next at the New Cross Public Hall. Mr Drew, who was formerly a resident of the neighbourhood, comes to us with strong recommendations as a public speaker, and we promise him a cordial welcome."

"I'm going to that, Henry," declared my mother, slapping the table emphatically. "Say what you like, but I'm going. I'm going to that meeting and going to hear my Len get up before a crowd of people and speak. You do as you please!"

Milly very handsomely gave in concerning my evening suit, and gained her mother's permission to go without a hat,

wearing on her head something of a light, lace nature called, I believe, a cloud. There was difficulty in obtaining tickets for three, but I moved heaven and earth and Mr Latham, in order to avoid worrying Len; the third came on the very morning of the affair. My mother wanted me to send him a telegram—an extravagance I had never heard her suggest before—asking him to eat with us, but I mentioned he would probably come from town with other people, warned her we must on no account make ourselves conspicuous. If Len saw us, and if Len liked to speak to us, well and good, but it was certainly not for us to push ourselves forward and claim his time at a moment when he would be fully engaged. I begged her to take particular care about the front of my best shirt which she was ironing.

We held reserved seats, and I had impressed upon my mother and upon Milly the necessity of not reaching the Hall too early, but we were there in the passage at half-past seven just before the doors opened, my two companions declaring they had never before, in their lives, been compelled to walk at such a desperate pace. We found ourselves, when inside, the only occupants of the six first rows, with the lights not yet turned up, and a certain amount of uproar at the back, appeals to sit down, commands to take off hats, noisy orders to stop the noise. Young men began to come to the green baize reporters' table; a steward fussed around them.

"Tisn't coming up to my anticipations," remarked my mother, dolefully.

"We must have patience," said Milly. "Twenty minutes to spare yet."

"Not much interest taken in politics about this neighbourhood," I remarked, standing to give folk at the back an opportunity of seeing me. They sent up a loud shout of "Waiter!" and I sat down.

The first man arriving on the platform and making his way through a thick forest of wooden chairs, received such a thundering burst of applause that he retired quickly. Folk

were shown into the reserved seats to our great relief, but a grisly apprehension began to possess me that I might prove to be the only man in the hall costumed with distinction, and I was about to put my light overcoat on when another evening dress youth came; we exchanged a look of congratulation and relief.

"Seems to be filling up slightly," remarked my mother.

"It will be a capital audience," prophesied Milly. "Do keep still, there's a good fellow, Henry; you're continually shifting about."

The platform folk came now in detachments of three and four, eyeing the back of the Hall; a few shook heads regretfully. The back of the Hall began to sing, and in the small gallery two young men blew tin trumpets. Some one in the seats behind us muttered appreciatively, "There's going to be a row!" I turned round and said in a sharp tone of voice, "There had better not!" and the man who made the remark asked what I had to do with it; I retorted vaguely I had a good deal to do with it; he insisted on further details concerning my responsibility, to which I answered, with increased mystery, that he had better wait and see. The chairman and some of the speakers came to the front of the platform, and those of us in sympathy cheered sufficiently to drown the less complimentary sounds.

"Do you see him, Henry?" whispered my mother.

"Sit down," roared the people at the back. "Sit down and keep down!" The man with whom I had had an altercation explained to them that I was the one person managing the entire affair.

The Hall listened to the Chairman because he possessed a white beard and a title; when, after giving the objects of the meeting, he announced it was not his intention of standing in the way of other speakers, applause came which apparently induced him to reconsider his idea of going on for an additional ten minutes. The prospective candidate for the borough spoke next and, possessing a tremendous



voice that increased its volume whenever any interruption or disturbance occurred, he too managed fairly well. But to the following speaker, a local man, the Hall definitely refused to give attention from the moment when he said, "My dear friends and fellow working men!" to the time when he declared they were a lot of noisy, snarling dogs, who ought to be wearing muzzles; if one of them bit him, he said, then for him the next train to Paris and a course of treatment by Mr Pasteur; he promised, scarlet in the face, and with threatening fist, that if they only waited for him outside, he would take them all on, one after the other; finally threw himself down with so much violence as to break the wooden chair, and the Hall, after a long scream of delight, prepared to deal with another speaker.

"I must really appeal to you—" shouted the Chairman.

"Trot another of 'em out."

"I must really ask you ——"

"Next please!"

"I ask you, as Englishmen, and men of—" An old bowler hat whirled down to the platform; the chairman announced a name, the reporters putting hands to ears in order to catch it.

"It's Len," cried my mother and I, in duet.

He had been sitting at the side of the platform screened from us by a large fern, and came forward now to the Chairman's table, smiling at the uproar and holding in his right hand a card with notes. Len was looking older, just about the age I myself wanted to be; his moustache had become thicker, his hair was parted differently. He wore a most excellent frock coat, with a few violets in the buttonhole, not a full bunch. Mother and Milly, slipping off gloves, helped me in the effort to furnish a good reception, as he stood there facing the tumult.

"This is the sort of thing." They gave farm-yard imitations. "I thoroughly enjoy." They groaned. "I've been to a drawing-room meeting in the West End this afternoon."

Cries of "Snob," and more booing. "And there, you know, not a sound came from the audience from start to finish." Some one shouted, "You sent them to sleep, that's why!" My brother went on. "But this fine, crowded Hall, and this enthusiastic meeting is also graced by the presence of ladies, and not too many of them; just enough to make us feel that we have to be on our best behaviour in their presence." A few of the women said in shrill tones, "Hear, hear!" the clamorous young men moderated efforts. "Some of these good and charming ladies who have done us the honour of coming to our meeting, are known to you, honoured and respected by you; there is one here to whom I owe everything. One here to whom I am indebted for the happiness that came to me in early years. One here—perhaps she is the only one—who wants to listen to what I have to say. Gentlemen"—he paused and everyone leaned forward—"she is my mother!"

Len held them all right after that. I passed my handkerchief along, really needing one myself; my mother retained it, fluttering it now and again when the Hall cheered. Len told a story about a slow suburban railway train (always a safe subject) and the Hall rocked with laughter; drew a parallel between this train and the party opposed to us, and the Hall showed that it recognised the point; stopped at the end of ten minutes.

"There, mother," he concluded, glancing down. People stood up to look at us, and we became red with pride. "That's the best I can do, and I wish for your dear sake I could have done better. Gentlemen," addressing the Hall again, in a voice that broke slightly, "I want you—I want you to know that by listening to me courteously, you have made one woman very happy."

Loud cheers.

"And any man who can honestly say that to himself is a man who need not be ashamed of feeling he has lived to some good purpose!"

You might have thought from the subsequent behaviour

of the meeting that no idea of discord or of opposition had ever entered its head. There were three other speakers (not particularly fluent), and when they found attention slipping, all they had to do was to remark, "As my friend Mr Drew has very happily said—" and the Hall signified its pleasure in being thus reminded of Len's speech. He had gone back to the seat previously occupied, and presently, in the interval between two speakers came forward to shake hands with the Chairman, and whisper an excuse, watch in hand; the Hall cheered him once more, but he modestly ignored this and went off quietly.

"Then we shan't see him afterwards!" I remarked to Milly, disappointedly.

"You'll have plenty of opportunities of running up against him."

"Never so many as I want. Confess now," I urged, "don't you think he's a man anyone could admire? Isn't he splendid?"

She spoke to my ear. "You're my boy," said Milly.

To the Keston Common outing I persuaded my mother to accompany me, and she assured me afterwards I spoke very well; better indeed than she had expected; the only thing was—it might have been fancy—she could not get rid of the impression that she had heard something like it before. My mother hastened to add that this was no doubt only imagination on her part. The newspaper cutting-book began to grow stout.

I wrote to Len, telling him how delighted we were, giving a message from mother, and an invented one from Milly, but he did not reply. Kitty Latham had a furious quarrel with me because I told her nothing about the meeting, declining to accept the explanation that it was impossible to obtain another ticket, and calling me deceitful, underhanded; accusing me of lack of straight-forwardness, and when I endeavoured to protest, took me once again by the shoulders and shook me fiercely. I knew before this she had a temper of her own, but its full violence had

not hitherto been exhibited, and I found myself irritated into expressing the view that she was not nearly good enough for my brother, upon which she burst into tears. Mr Latham came in at that moment. "Look you here, Henery, my lad," he said, shaking a forefinger at me. "Don't want to complain without cause, and don't want to go into the rights or wrongs of the affair, but if anyone upsets my girl, I shall upset him. I shall upset him in a manner that won't make it necessary for anyone ever to upset him again, as you may say!" It is fair to mention that Kitty re-assured him, declaring the fault entirely hers, and begging her father to dismiss the incident from his mind. "As you wish," he conceded. "Only I should like it to be gener'lly known that I don't always forget, and I'm one of the worst hands at forgiving that you'll come across this side of the river!"

Milly wanted to see *Dorothy* and had made herself acquainted with the music; when it became no longer possible to evade the hints given—I must have often appeared mean in those days, but really there was not a great deal of money to spare; both my mother and myself wanted to pay our way, and have the rent complete and ready by the end of each quarter when the landlord came to tell my mother how much better she was looking and to collect it—then I took Milly up to an afternoon performance and afterwards we had tea in Piccadilly. Being in the West End, it seemed right we should explore a neighbourhood not fully known to either of us, and we crossed and went up Sackville Street, which I thought led straight into Regent Street. Finding this was not the case, I took Milly into Savile Row, assuring her I knew the way, and there, after another turning, found myself in a perfect maze, so that it seemed likely one would have to submit to the indignity of putting a question to a constable. Keeping on, we came to Hanover Square where a distracting number of roads presented themselves for selection.

"Now," triumphantly, when we discovered ourselves in



Regent Street, "now say I don't know London. This is Verrey's, this corner restaurant."

"So I see," remarked Milly, "by the name at the corner. Which way do we turn now?"

A hansom pulled up as we were going to cross, and we waited to see who alighted; another followed closely, and the two well-dressed men who had stepped from the first, having paid their driver, waited for the people in the second cab.

"Len!" I exclaimed, squeezing Milly's arm. It only required this event to set the top on an admirable day, and give me something of special note to tell my mother at home. "I'm going to speak to him!"

"Wait and see whether he notices us."

The large important woman in a white opera-cloak (not much over thirty-five, but that seemed to me then an advanced age) chatted to the two young men whilst Len found some silver.

"Now we are ready," said Len. "Exceeding sorry to have detained you, Mrs Woodrow. Allow me to go first."

I went forward and touching his coat said "Hullo!" He looked down, and it was clear he did not recognise me in my new bowler hat, for he shook his head and went on up the stairs. We heard the large lady saying the police, if they were of any use at all, should positively interfere and put a stop to all this pestering; twice that day she had been spoken to by dreadful men who wanted to sell bootlaces.

## CHAPTER X

### ANOTHER IMITATION OF LEN

THE doctor came to see Mr Latham, the one medical man in the neighbourhood hitherto trusted because he generously assumed the patient was a moderate individual, and that any indisposition did not arise from excessive partiality to spirits. By departing from the rule, he found himself on this occasion ordered out of the house, pursued so far as his carriage by bitter reproaches.

"Won't take the trouble to study a case, Henery," Latham explained to me, "that's what I complain about in the medical profession. If me or you find a posting station wants overhauling, why we go and have a good look over it, and we say, 'Give her another support 'ere,' and 'Give her a stay there!' We don't say, 'Well, she's no use as a station; we shall have to haul her down and break her up for firewood!' That's what he wants to do with me. He's asking me to change my style, and my nature, and my daily occurrences and everything. It isn't reasonable! There's no sense in it!" Mr Latham raised a trembling hand impressively. "Rather than do which—" he began.

"You'll have to stop some of it," looking up from my writing.

"Some of what?"

"Some of the drink."

He gazed at me appealingly; it made proof of our altered relations that one could speak to him in this manner. For some time past I had given up calling him "sir."

"Get on with your work," he ordered, in a feeble, forcible

way. "You talk too much for a lad of your age. No business to take a liberty. I won't have it."

"Sign this letter."

He took the penholder, examining it with interest, and giving an order for more ink. Then squared shoulders, took a deep breath, and prepared to execute his one clerical task.

"No use," he cried, distressedly, throwing the penholder, nib downwards into the table. "Can't remember how it starts. Henery, you must do it for me. I shall have to see my solicitor and give you a power to sign or whatever they call it. Used to be able to write my name as well as anybody. All gone, now."

I sent off the letter; busied myself with inspecting some communications on a file, knowing well that a deliberate manner would prove impressive. Overhead Kitty played a triumphant air, from which I knew she had heard from Len that day. Months had gone since I received a letter from him.

"Henery," said Mr Latham, weakly, "you're very peculiar in your behaviour towards me. What's wrong?"

"You!"

He found his handkerchief and rubbed his eyes. "Out with it all," he begged. "Can't stand this suspense."

A long argument, and one which seemed likely to have no definite results until at the crucial moment I stood on a chair and with a ruler rapped at the ceiling. Kitty came down, her eyes sparkling with excitement, and the case being placed before her by us, alternately, and sometimes in duet, she announced that Henry Drew was quite right, that her father was in the wrong; Henry Drew's proposal ought certainly to be carried out, and to-day seemed the time to begin. He pleaded there existed no necessity for haste, a week or two one way or the other could make no great difference, but we were obstinate.

"When I get married," she contended, "I don't want to be conducted up the aisle of the church by a

shaky old gentleman who makes everybody laugh. I want it all to go off well. A girl doesn't have a wedding very often."

"Wish you'd hurry up with yours," he remarked, gloomily. "I've got a scheme of my own on hand, and every week makes my chances worse."

"Do you mean," laughed Kitty, "that you too want to get married?"

Her father retorted that he did not intend to tell us the lady's name, or her address, or give a description of her; all he felt inclined to say was that she had a broad, sensible mind, differing considerably in this respect from some he could mention. She, at any rate, understood that a man required a tonic now and again, recognised he could not do his best work without some assistance of the kind.

"So the sooner you, my girl, bring affairs to a climax, as you may say, the better for all parties."

"Meanwhile," I said, "we want your promise that you will never touch a drop without the consent of Kitty and myself, and we shall keep a proper record, day by day."

"It's treating me," he growled, "as though I was an infant in arms, but I suppose for the sake of peace and quietness, I'd better give in. Shan't hear the last of it, if I don't."

We reduced the quantity with care, and he admitted one day that the old ability to write a signature had returned. Kitty and I became good friends again over this business, and she showed to me on one occasion a part of a communication she had received from Len. I pointed out that he particularly requested at the end that she should burn the note; Kitty admitted she had hitherto complied with such instructions, but this was a beautiful letter that she wanted to preserve all her life, and it was with reluctance she eventually agreed with my contention that any request made by my brother ought to be strictly obeyed. Meanwhile, there was difficulty in erasing the Regent Street incident from my memory.



To the wedding of Aunt Mabel's elder daughter it was hoped he would come, but when the couple had left for Eastbourne and chances of his presence diminished, my Aunt said excusingly she supposed Len was much too important now to take any notice of the family ; prophesied the time would come when he would cut me in the street, a suggestion which my mother and I contradicted warmly. Aunt Mabel protested she intended to say nothing against him ; she had but hinted at that which stood to reason. If she were Len, and if she were getting on well in commercial life—neither of these things, she assured us, represented her own case—and if people were beginning to say of her that she ought to stand for the County Council, why she would count it a great nuisance to be called upon to run down to New Cross every evening of her life, or trot off to Peckham whenever there happened to be a wedding.

"You're both a great deal too hard on Len," argued Aunt Mabel. "Wonder he stands it so well as he does. I should lose my temper with you. Does he still pay anything to you, dear?"

My mother answered this had been stopped some time before.

"Don't blame him!" declared the other. "It always looked to me very much like imposition. Fair's fair, even where relatives are concerned!"

It was never possible to carry on a discussion with Aunt Mabel with any hope of success, and my mother and I exchanged a look which signified we were willing to be misunderstood. At the moment, when my aunt announced that if nobody cared for any more tea, the guests might as well see about clearing off—"It's been a tiring day for me," she remarked, "and I shan't be sorry to put my foot up on the sofa"—at that moment a hansom drove up, and we all rushed to the open window. There was Len, my splendid brother, telling the driver to come back in a quarter of an hour, and giving a ring at the side door fitting the importance

of the occasion. The maid was found and bundled downstairs.

"No, no!" cried his voice, as he came up the stairs. "Surely the affair was fixed for to-morrow! I had it down in my diary for to-morrow, of that I'm perfectly certain. My dear aunt!" Entering the room, where we stood in an expectant, delighted semi-circle. "How can I excuse myself for this deplorable blunder!"

"It isn't your fault," she assured him. "Come and sit down and make yourself comfortable."

He kissed mother, and turning begged her to introduce him to the grown-up gentleman.

"I can believe a lot of things," asserted Len, "that other people won't credit, but you are not going to persuade me this good chap with a slight moustache is my little brother Henry. I certainly heard from somebody that he was getting on remarkably well——"

"Kitty is not here," I interjected.

"Kitty who?"

"Kitty Latham."

"Mother," he went on, taking my arm, "this is the man who is going to take us back to Blackheath. We rely upon him."

"You'll get there first, Len."

"Nonsense!" he declared, lightly. "You mustn't believe all you see in the newspapers." He went across and spoke to my unmarried cousin; the other guests reminded him of a former meeting and he assured them he recollected the occasion well. Produced from the inside pocket of his frock-coat, a small morocco case, and begged Aunt Mabel casually to add it to the presents, and give to the bride on her return his apologies for the delay.

"Now let us talk," he said, confidentially, coming back to me. "Caught sight of you that evening at the Hall, and what I thought was that you would at least come out and see me down to the station. Felt rather hurt about that, Henry. Stupid of me, I know, but perhaps I'm inclined to be

sensitive. Since that I've never so much as caught a glimpse of you."

"Saw you once in Regent Street, Len."

"You saw me once," he repeated, deliberately, "in Regent Street, and you didn't speak to me? Mother! Aunt Mabel! Just listen to this! What do you think of a brother who—"

The unanimous decision was that my conduct admitted of no defence, and mother reproved me openly for not, at least, telling her of the incident; I could only declare that the event had gone rapidly from my memory, and everyone shook a head in a reproving manner.

"So sorry to have to hurry off," he said, addressing Aunt Mabel. "Quite looked forward, too, to spending a long day with you to-morrow."

"Come to-morrow, all the same," she said, hospitably.

"It's a long time," interposed my mother, "since he came to see me. We've got new wall paper in the passage, Len, that you've never looked at."

"I've put up shelves for books in my bedroom," I said.

"Let me write," he promised us, "and fix a date. Booked for a good lot of speaking just now. Gladstone's going to retire, I hear, and Rosebery won't be much of a success, and we shall all be in the thick of it soon." A shy youth who had not spoken before, said suddenly, "Who says so?" We stunned him with indignant glances. "Good-bye, mother dear. Good-bye, little man; don't snub me again if we meet in London."

"Any message for Kitty," I asked, in going down the stairs. For she would be sure to ask.

"Hang Kitty!" he answered, explosively. "Worst of women-folk is they never know when to cease being a nuisance!"

"She's fond of you, Len."

"Look here, Henry. Tell her I made lots of inquiries, and sent my love, and expressed a hope she wouldn't forget me. Will that do, do you think?"

"Thank you very much, Len."

He stepped into the cab. "I really will come down and see her one evening," he promised, looking over the splash-board. "After all there are many less amusing girls than Kitty. Wonder you've never fallen in love with her yourself. By-the-bye, how are the Fowlers?"

"Milly's very well," blushing. "Ernest is growing rather thick-headed, in my opinion."

"You haven't learnt the trick yet," he said. "One has to drop these people as one goes along, or else they get in the way."

There came proof that Len had not forgotten me the moment he parted—as he might well have done, considering the calls on his time and attention—in the fact that the next evening Carter Paterson delivered a parcel containing some garments for which he had no further use. By Milly's instructions I did not wear these (agreeing with her that at my age and in my position, it scarcely looked well to go about with sleeves of coats turned back, legs of trousers turned up) but they were preserved carefully and served to remind me of the days, after Blackheath, when I watched carefully the suit which happened to be in his possession, with the knowledge that sooner or later his lease would fall in and the property revert to me.

Ernest Fowler was specially trying at this period, in that he declined to take any further interest in politics (a subject I was taking up strongly because it seemed likely to be closely associated with Len) and insisted on talking of nothing but vegetarianism. Like all newly converted, he was not content with having himself found salvation, but required everyone to follow, and when we met for our walk of an evening, or when we encountered each other after classes, his first question always was—

"What have you had to eat to-day?"

The details furnished never met with his entire approval. Accustomed to his frequent changes of view, I did sometimes protest against his attempted interference with the



dictates of my ready appetite, and we had heated arguments together on the effect of (say) lentils on the brain, celery for the joints, and other subjects. I was beginning to despair of convincing him that right and common sense and everything were on my side, when I came across one day near the canal bridge in Old Kent Road, a young man being driven in a commercial-looking brougham packed to the windows with green card-board cases, who ordered his coachman to stop, and hailed me.

"You're Drew's brother," he said, leaning out of the window space. "Spotted you the moment I caught sight of you."

"Forget your name," I answered, "but you're the one who took a walking-stick and gave such capital imitations of musical instruments."

He found his letter-case and, rejecting the business side, took out a card and gave it me. In the corner was printed "Refined Comedian. Everything to Please and Nothing to Offend."

"Seen anything of him lately? I've written over and over again, and sent him bits from newspapers, but he never takes the leastest notice. Sure I don't know why," he went on, resentfully. "A chap's none the worse for being in the lace trade in Watling Street."

"Have all the others I met that evening dropped you, too?"

"Nothing of the kind. We're chums still, and he's treated us all in identically the same manner. Because he's getting on in the world, he seems to have picked up an entirely new set."

"Len knows best."

"A tactful remark to make," he protested. "I suppose it means you would have behaved in the same way if you had been in his place?" He gave the coachman an order to proceed. "Then all I can say is," he said, wrinkling his forehead in the effort of thought, "that—that I'm sorry for you."

The talk brought back to memory the recommendation made by Len at the close of the party. A card arrived at office from Ernest Fowler saying, "Be at New Cross Gate seven thirty," and I resolved to take no notice. The next day a card came, "Sorry my communication of yesterday did not reach you. Will call at Shardeloes Road eight to-night," and I left the house before that hour without telling my mother or the two lady lodgers where I was going. A long letter from Ernest after this; he felt at a loss to understand my behaviour; if he had said anything to offend me, he could but declare willingness to apologise, and make amends in any way suggested; to this I gave no attention. Milly told me Ernest seemed upset about something; I mentioned importantly it was no matter requiring interference from a third person, and our Sunday afternoon stroll through Greenwich Park was not the most successful we had experienced; the rest near our favourite tree was devoted to art work on the gravel, and only a fine feeling of power in thus causing disturbance to another saved me from sharing depression.

A good many people considered it incumbent upon them to make considerable efforts to bring us together. Ernest explained the whole of the circumstances to the two city warehouse ladies, and they lost no opportunity of lecturing me on the high value of friendship, the necessity of being true to one's old acquaintances, the fate awaiting those careless of the rights and claims of intimates. Ernest took the step of speaking to Kitty Latham, a circumstance which, known at St Donatt's Road, would have brought upon him the severe condemnation of the whole of his family, and she gave counsel. Complete absence of definite cause for the disagreement proved a valuable asset, for this enabled me to refuse to discuss the subject, asserting it was a matter concerning our two selves alone.

"The lad seemed very much worried," urged Kitty.

"So he ought to be."

"See him and talk it over. I'm feeling particularly happy

just now, and I want to see everyone else the same. To oblige me, little brother-in-law."

"You haven't called me that for a long time."

"There's been a reason," she answered, cheerfully. "What shall I tell young Fowler if he speaks to me about you again?"

"Tell him I prefer to chose my acquaintances, and not to have them forced upon me."

"Your brother wouldn't behave in that way."

"Just shows how much you know about it," I retorted. "If girls only discussed the subjects they were conversant with, there wouldn't be so much feminine chatter going on."

"If boys understood the meaning of words of more than two syllables," she replied, "they wouldn't make people laugh as they do now. I like a row as well as anyone, but once it's over, it's done with me. When Len calls here next, I'm going to have a quarrel with him."

"What about?"

"Anything!" she answered. "I shall only pretend to be cross with him, and then we shall make it up, and we shall be better friends than ever."

"Seems to me," I said, warmly, "that you've no right to worry and bother Len in that way."

"Now, who is interfering?" demanded Kitty.

Flattering, of course, to discover that Ernest made these extraordinary attempts to restore amicable relations, and I might have enjoyed it the more but that, to tell the truth, I missed his companionship; an experiment with a fellow-student at the classes where I was endeavouring now to learn enough German to be able to explain to Milly the meaning of the title of a song when we attended concerts, made me, for one evening only, the companion of a blade who persisted in speaking to unescorted young women in Lewisham High Road, with the eventual result that I reached home with a bowler hat, smashed and spoilt by the



umbrella belonging to one indignant school girl who had aimed at my friend. Another, whose gait seemed to preclude anything like extravagant gaiety of demeanour, walked with me at a snail's pace to Lee and back, discussing cures for corns.

The idea occurred to me that my self-respect demanded I should do something more wildly adventurous. Many of our hands had a regular habit of breaking out into irregularity about twice a month, and when after a day's absence the sportsman returned to be censured by Mr Latham or by me—

"Now you understand. If this happens again, serious notice will be taken."

—It was whispered around that So-and-so had been on the spree, and his colleagues took part in the spirit of desperate recklessness. The ex-soldiers amongst them always went on the bust (another way of describing the same event) the evening of the day on which they received their reserve allowance. The man himself on returning to work looked rather sad about the eyes, seemed disinclined for speech, and inclined to take melancholy views, but later exhibited a certain pride, and began to give particulars of the jamboree; the most triumphant method of closing the account was to be able to say—"And after that, I no more know what 'appened than this old can of mine does!" A murmur of envy and approval followed the declaration.

It was no common or ordinary splash that I, after deliberation, decided to make, and it seemed clearly impossible for me to model my procedure on that of the less important members of the staff. Difficulty arose in the fact that there was no one of my acquaintance to whom I could apply for suggestions who would not immediately respond with good advice and warning, urgent recommendations not to act the goat, to remember what was due to my position and to my people; the more counsels of this nature I imagined, the more determined I became to break



away from the even tenour of my life, and in particular, to prove myself as one resenting the behaviour of fortune. A second difficulty consisted in the fact that there was no use in assuming that I could, by any effort, become the worse for drink, or the better for drink. Drink never had much effect upon me, and when I took a little I found I had taken enough, and nothing but a miracle could enable me to take more. I think I had some notion that the results of excess, might, with an effort, be simulated, and the idea was to create something like the disorder effected on boat-race nights by gentlemen from Oxford and Cambridge. Obviously, this could not be done alone. Memory of the newspaper records failed to recall an instance where an undergraduate had, without the aid of colleagues, disturbed the peace. I sent for Buckmaster.

"Well, Mr Henry," said the old man, after listening attentively, and speaking with perfect respect, "if you don't mind placing yourself in my hands, I'll do the best I can to show you round. Don't want to brag, but there isn't many who know the ropes quite so well as I do. What about the date, sir?"

Buckmaster, that very evening, was waiting at the Marquis of Granby corner, shaven, dressed in the best clothes he possessed and a bowler hat presented by me which was not quite large enough for him, so that although the evening was calm and still enough to permit us to travel outside the tram-car, one hand was fully occupied in making sure of his head-gear. His cheeriness and confidence atoned for the entire absence of these qualities on my part, and I could not help noticing that as we neared the river at Westminster Bridge, Buckmaster's respectful manner diminished and he began to call me Drew; on the north side, when we started to walk into St James's Park, he slapped my shoulder and invited me to wake up. A suggestion that we should have a lark with the milk stall which, at that time, stood near to Spring Gardens was vetoed; he seemed discouraged and I pointed out that the hour was still young; he remarked

rather curtly that the hour was not alone in this respect. We went up the Duke of York's steps, and in St James's Street he shewed me the windows of the club to which he once belonged; I was about to suggest that his position had been that of a waiter when a stout, florid elderly gentleman came down the steps and seeing him cried, with great enthusiasm,

"Hullo, Bucky old boy, how are you? Going well and strong, that's right!"

And went on without waiting for an answer.

"Now just look here, my lad," said Buckmaster, as we turned east, through Piccadilly. "No earthly use our pretending that we shall find it all the same as it was in the old days. Everything changes in this world. But I rather flatter myself I can take you into one or two places where you wouldn't be able to go without me. It's too early for the Café Riche; Mott's, in Foley Street doesn't start till late, and what I'm going to do is to just stroll round with you and tell you where they are, so that if we don't get a chance of looking in at all of them to-night, you can come up here by yourself and—What's this place?"

"Piccadilly Circus."

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Buckmaster.

He announced, when I had conducted him to the spot, that the Haymarket looked but very little changed, and recommended we should take, first the right hand side going down. To his disappointment, he could discover in the Haymarket none of the haunts of his youth, and begged me to take him to Leicester Square where he felt sure he would be on safer ground. One resort of notable quality we found occupied by a German sandwich shop. The Shades, a place he had been speaking of with relish, had given way to the Empire; the Judge and Jury entertainment could not be discovered, and this last blow forced poor old Buckmaster to admit — "Mr Henry, sir" — that an interval of thirty years had elapsed since he last visited the neighbourhood. We took chocolate in the Adelaide Gallery

near the station, and caught the nine forty-five for New Cross.

I had begun to think my action might be marred by impetuosity, when Milly announced that her parents, distressed by my absence from the house, had commanded her to give a formal invitation to supper. It was possible to see that a mistake had been made in selecting for the first essay a member of this particular family; Len would not have committed a blunder of the kind. To St Donatt's Road I went therefore, prepared to give in deliberately but generously, consenting, after proper deliberation, to offer to Ernest once again, the hand of friendship with a warning that he must be more careful, in future, not to strain the bonds. Ernest was not there, Mr and Mrs Fowler received me pleasantly, and during the meal we talked of the usefulness of sandwich boards as compared with give-away bills.

"Milly," said her mother, when they had cleared away, "just run out with this letter to the post before it's forgotten. Now, Henry Drew," turning to me, "tell father and tell me exactly what you mean by your behaviour."

"My behaviour, Mrs Fowler?"

"Don't repeat what I say; say what you have to say for yourself. Ernie is a good, dear boy; peculiar in some matters, no doubt, but he's quite as good as you are. His position is equal to yours. You will remember it wasn't so long ago you were sweeping out a small general shop."

"Gently, mother," interrupted her husband.

"You may get on better in the future than Ernest, or he may get on better than you; that remains to be proved. But if you can't manage to keep good friends with him, that shows quite clearly you're not a fit person——"

"Go slow, old girl," said Mr Fowler.

"Not a fit person to associate with the rest of us. So in future, Henry Drew, you don't come to this house unless you're invited, and you don't see Milly without our permission.



That's my last word, and your hat and stick are in the hall. Shut the garden gate as you go out, and if you meet Milly say 'Good-night' and walk on."

"Don't be too hard on 'em, mother. We were all young once."

"Mrs Fowler," I cried in desperation, "you mustn't punish me too severely. I can't give up Milly, and I don't want to give up you and Mr Fowler, and if I could only see Ernest this very minute, I'd make it right and shake hands with him like anything. Please don't be harsh. Don't do anything you'll be sorry for afterwards. That wasn't what I meant," going on hurriedly. "What I meant was, don't do anything I shall be sorry for afterwards. Send for Ernest now. Do please send for him. You can't understand what all this means to me."

"You'll find my boy," she said steadily, "three doors off. Go there and see him and apologise, and if he's willing, why father and myself will have no objection. And I daresay Milly, but you'll have to settle with her for yourself."

I pointed out later (anxious to re-assert myself after something like grovelling) as Milly accompanied me to the end of the road, that in theory my action had been correct and defensible; it stood to reason that as one made way in the world, an increased discretion was necessary. Len had been compelled to do this; everyone else, in like position, would have to do it in a greater or lesser degree.

"But you must observe this," I said, argumentatively. "It resolves itself into a sum of subtraction. One from twelve leaves eleven, but one from one leaves nought, and one from nought you can't. Before you begin to cut down the list of your friends, you must first take care to see that the list is a tidy large one; you must also make sure that you will find no difficulty in replacing them."

"I see what you mean," said Milly.

"Apart from which, there are the feelings of other people to be considered. How would it strike you if anyone you cared



for very much, resolved to drop you? What would your sensations be like if you had a letter from a dear friend, saying it was all at an end between you?"

"I suppose," she replied, "I should frown and bear it. Give me a kiss here, whilst we're in the shadow. You're a queer little chap, but you are my own dear boy!"

## CHAPTER XI

### LEN PLAYS FOR LOVE

**W**ARNED by the frightful risk incurred, the old terms of friendship with Ernest were not only restored but their strength increased ; when he suggested we should go in his holidays for a canal trip through London I readily made all the arrangements.

Having written a description of the trip which I thought not particularly good, and in some parts exaggerated, with incidents that never occurred, and references to some slight disasters occurring to me which might well have been omitted, he insisted on sending it in to an evening journal, and at the railway bookstall one afternoon I was amazed to find on a placard "London from a Gondola, by Ernest Fowler." I cultivated other acquaintances at this period, and in my diary of the year are such entries as "Met James Markham," and "Met Thomas H. Grey," and "Dropped George Manktelow." A new acquaintance, forced upon me, I discovered at Mr Latham's house on my return from the canal trip.

He had improved greatly in health under our supervision, but had become more irascible in temper, contending that we should now release him from his promise, declaring he felt so well that a hogshead a day could not harm him ; threatened, when we refused to concede anything, to turn me out into the street, and on being dared by Kitty to do this, muttered mysterious warnings to the effect that he still had something up his sleeve, that Jimmy Latham looked a fool, but was, in reality no fool, that to catch him you had to be out and about before sunrise ; few people in this world could place their hands on their hearts and declare, with

truth, that they had ever bested Jimmy. His daughter informed me afterwards that on the second day of my absence he dressed himself in Sunday suit, picked a red rose from the garden, and in reply to her question told her he was going out on a matter of business.

"Mind your promise, father!"

"Just what I intend to do, my girl," he said.

Two hours later a four-wheeler came rocking along the road in Hatcham and Kitty's father stepping out, introduced a tall, stout lady as "My Second."

Mrs Latham received me, with one eye indicating distrust and the other shewing wariness. (She informed me some months later that in her day a slight squint was considered quite the thing, admitted however that fashions altered.) Mrs Latham asked at once whether I was always trotting about enjoying myself, or whether it was my custom to give occasionally a few moments of attention to the work of the firm; during the day, when writing in the office, I rarely glanced around to the frosted glass upper half of the door without seeing her there, whereupon she cried in menacing tones,

"Yes, I'm a watching you!"

And went, evidently feeling that she was using energetic measures, and forwarding the best interests of the establishment. One afternoon, when I was particularly busy, she came in and, hoisting herself with difficulty to the top of a high stool said rapidly, "Now then, Master Drew, let me see how you keep your accounts, unless I'm very much mistaken there's some hanky-panky going on here, Mr L. places too much reliance on you to my manner of thinking, I've had to deal with dishonest barmen in my time," and the explanation she received was so involved and confusing, that she gave up all effort to understand, saying I had made it quite plain to her; she felt bound to admit the system appeared satisfactory so far as it went. Kitty she ruled with steel. Kitty's movements were watched. No opportunities now for Kitty to run up to town of an afternoon; to go to Lewisham High

Road of an evening ; whenever she announced her intention of starting out, her stepmother would say,

"Half a minute, my child, for me to put on my bonnet, and I'll come with you, if I don't take exercise I shall be losing my figure, nothing like a walk to keep anybody slim, shan't be half a moment !"

Mr Latham perhaps suffered most under the new autocracy. He frequently told me it was not her money he wanted, although, mind you, a bit of property constituted no drawback with a wife, especially a second wife ; what he had assumed was that a lady, accustomed to generous distribution of beverages, one who had been in the public line since she was so high, would certainly look indulgently on a slight excess in consumption, as you might say. Instead of which, Mr Latham pointed out, she had docked him of everything inside the house, absolutely everything, and when he returned from some matter of outdoor business, insisted upon kissing him, not, he declared, as a sign of affection, but simply in order to detect whether he had obeyed or disobeyed her commands. Friends, condoling with his unfortunate predicament, made recommendations ; he retorted that cloves were of no use when you had to deal with a woman of such vast experience. Mr Latham wept in describing all this, and I do think that our method of gradual diminishment was kinder and wiser than the plan adopted by the new lady, for he became greatly depressed and told Kitty that but for my presence, he would give it all up ; assured me that but for Kitty's help and encouragement, he would fill his pockets with stones and dashed well drop himself into the canal. Kitty still wrote to Len every day, although I gave it as my opinion that this was a mistake ; in my own case, I should feel that so many communications, excepting they came from Milly, amounted to the proportions of a nuisance.

"Must keep myself in his memory," she argued. "You don't understand, little brother-in-law, but I do. He meets a lot of people, he must come across a number of girls, and if sometimes he should find himself thinking twice about one



of them, why, along comes my letter, and he thinks instead about me. Sure you'll find I'm right!"

In time the new Mrs Latham either conquered her suspicion, or this was overpowered by a desire for company; anyhow, she began to make a practice of coming into the office whilst I was there, dragging a rocking-chair after her, a task to which I gave assistance so soon as she hove in sight. It proved possible after a while, and indeed easy, to go on with my work and yet appear to give complete attention whilst she described at great length, and with wonderful fidelity, incidents which occurred during her service at the counter; the stout lady had that remarkable gift of description sometimes met in unexpected quarters, with never a word too much, never an important detail omitted. In the recitation of dialogue she proved sometimes over-garrulous, persisting in going back in a conscientious manner when anything had been omitted, with—

"Oh, but before that, I must tell you, I said to him——"

The story of her public life finished brilliantly in that she had been able, after doing it up, to dispose of the house—"Turn where you will, my dear, you're bound to see half a dozen reflections of yourself!"—to excellent advantage. I asked her once whether she had made her will; she answered that to take that step would mean going to bed immediately after writing her signature, and giving an order to my Aunt Mabel at Peckham. Mrs Latham hoped she knew better than give such a temptation to Providence. I repeated some of her stories to Ernest Fowler, who had announced his intention of retiring from literary life because of the difficulty of finding subjects which commended themselves to the fancy of editors, and assuredly I did not give them with anything resembling her vivacity, but Ernest listened, and a month later he was able to show me in the first number of a new magazine, chapter one of "The Crown and Anchor," with illustrations of which Ernest complained with as much bitterness as though he had been writing for years. He told me, in confidence, that a little more en-

couragement and he would give up his berth in the City ; this I repeated to my mother, in confidence, and she told Milly, and Milly told her mother and her father, and we held a family counsel one night at St Donatt's Road, with Ernest at the end of the table, all of us imploring him to do nothing rash ; I remember I argued very strongly. To be quite honest, I never at that time heard of a triumph on the part of any close acquaintance without experiencing a twinge of envy. Excepting, of course, in the case of Len.

The new Mrs Latham, something of a female detective, placed the drawing-room blotting-pad in front of the gilt-framed mirror, with results, and a blazing scene with Kitty ensued. Mrs Latham declared no girl of nineteen, or even older, being in her charge and under her superintendence, had ever been allowed to carry on ; the moment she found anything which resembled carrying on, she at once put her foot down ; a number of instances were quoted in support of this assertion. She demanded to know the lad's name, information which the looking-glass had not revealed ; Kitty refused to give it. Did I know ? I knew, but there was no intention on my part to give particulars which Kitty did not care to reveal. We felt we had triumphed, but that evening she obtained Len's name quite easily from Mr Latham : thereupon sent a note to Len, requesting the pleasure of his company at dinner, and announced to all that she would take the opportunity of giving him a good straight talk and no nonsense about it ; we consoled ourselves with the feeling that he would be certain not to accept. Mrs Latham gave frequent rehearsals of the address she proposed to deliver, beginning with "I shall say," and presently, warming to the subject, using another tense, as though giving a description of incidents past and gone.

But Len did come. He had not answered the invitation, but he did come, wonderfully dressed—silk hat, heavy overcoat, evening dress—and from the moment he entered the

room upstairs, Mrs Latham became a slave like the rest of us. Now and again, during the meal, I saw a glint in her left eye, and heard her give a slight cough, which seemed to intimate a resolve to enter upon plain blunt speech, but a word from Len changed all this; his manner to Kitty could scarcely have been improved, and his deference to Mrs Latham's political opinions—which were that one party was as bad as the other, and perhaps worse—seemed perfect. (Kitty said afterwards it was quite a treat to find me sitting still for once and not talking; she felt nervous all the time lest I should open my lips and spoil everything.)

“And dear mother?” he said, looking across at me. It was like him to observe that I was being neglected and to direct conversation in my quarter. “There are many drawbacks to all this knocking about in the world, but one of the worst, little man, is that I see nothing of you two. What I should like to do would be to run down every evening of my life. By the bye, are you doing much in the evenings now?” I murmured something about my German. “Tell you what you could do for me, only perhaps you wouldn't care to spare the time.”

They all said I could quite well spare the time. Mrs Latham added that any occupation was better than none, and made a quotation concerning idle hands.

“I'm going to be busy in the next three months. Excuse me, Mrs Latham, for talking shop.”

“Don't name it, Mr Drew.”

“Needn't bother you, Henry, with the particulars now, but it will be a tremendous help to me to have someone to write the thousand and one letters about ordinary subjects. Now, do you think you could manage to come straight from here of an evening not to my rooms in Tavistock Place——”

“I thought——”

“Not to my rooms in Tavistock Place,” he went on, with a glance at Kitty who also showed surprise, “and give a useful hand for an hour or so? Don't decide now! Think it over and send a line to my club.”

"Where is your club?" asked Kitty Latham.

"I'll give the particulars to Henry."

"Are letters sent on to you from the old address?"

"Very glad to say that they are sent on," he answered, with an inclination of the head towards her. Her good temper returned.

They looked at me imploringly and began to speak together; I stopped them and said that perhaps they would allow me to answer Len for myself. Of course I should be willing to do as he suggested; the only question was, when to begin?

"And the terms!" interposed Mrs Latham, with the relish of a business woman. "I always like, in matters of this kind, to have a definite arrangement, saves such a lot of argument later on."

"Please, please, Mrs Latham," I said.

"Known cases where the best of friends have parted because one side thought so much, and the other side was under the impression that it was only so much."

Len and I exchanged a nod, and allowed them to talk. We understood each other a great deal better than they understood us, but it evidently gratified them to discuss the matter. Mr Latham said that if so be as His Nibs liked to come a bit earlier in the morning, why then it could be made convenient, as you might say, for him to pop off a bit earlier at night, providing always that he left everything straight and ship-shape, for there was no use in pretending that he, Mr Latham, was the man he had been at the time when people allowed him a certain amount of liberty. Mrs Latham contributed to the scheme by suggesting that I should eat at the house every week-day, and offered, in the exceptional circumstances, to arrange this free of any charge on the understanding that I took what was put before me without criticism; I pointed out that my mother's chief joy was in preparing my evening meal, and in persuading me to over-eat myself, but the Lathams said they felt certain, once the matter had been fully and correctly explained, she



would fall in with the proposition. Kitty asked whether she could not accompany me and make herself useful; Len thanked her cordially, but one had to be extremely careful nowadays.

"Quite right, Mr Drew," agreed Mrs Latham. "Young girls are a great deal too forward in my opinion. In my time we used to be exactly the opposite, and I'm sure we used to get proposals of marriage much more frequently, in consequence."

"Seems difficult to imagine," remarked Kitty, "that you ever possessed a retiring nature."

"Silence, miss!"

"Is it all settled then?" asked Len, briskly. "Good! Knew you'd stand by me."

"It will seem like Great Tower Street times to be working together again, Len."

"Ah," he said, reminiscently. "That reminds me. I think we'll call you Mr Henry again, just to emphasise the resemblance. I met old G. W. P. the other night at a dinner at the Cecil, and he became quite communicative. Seemed rather hurt about you, but I think I contrived to get back into his good favour."

"Trust you for that," I laughed. "Believe if you met a ghost, you'd get something to your advantage out of him."

Mrs Latham had once seen a ghost, and described the incident faithfully, from the moment when she heard a slight commotion downstairs in the bar, and slipped on her dressing-gown, to the moment when she hit the ghost on its right wrist with a tankard and said, "Look here, Cheesman, my lad, I engaged you to do a job of whitewashing, but that doesn't justify you trying to open the till!" We decided that this, an interesting occurrence in its way, did not rightly come under the heading of ghost encounters. Mr Latham told us that in strolling along by the canal at night, he had sometimes thought a person was following, could have sworn he heard the tap-tap of footsteps on the damp path, but looking around saw no one, and was forced to the conclusion

that there were ghosts and ghosts, some so vague that it was impossible for the human eye to make anything of them, others of a more tangible description. Perhaps they varied, just as human beings did. Mrs Latham ventured to assume that these experiences had occurred, mainly after the hour of half past twelve at night, but he assured her that on the contrary he had found them since everybody had taken a hand in the game of doctoring him and treating him as though he were a child in arms, unable to sit up and take nourishment. Kitty had never seen a ghost, and did not want to see a ghost; bad enough to dream sometimes of terrifying incidents without finding them transferred to waking hours.

"The ghost I'm afraid of meeting some day," said Len, pushing his chair, crossing one knee over the other and gazing at the backs of his white hands "is—don't you listen to this, little man—is that of a boy. I shall come across him quite suddenly. It will make me realise—Is your clock right, Mrs. Latham?"

"Unless someone has been fiddling about with it. Go on, Mr Drew. You're not in a hurry to be off yet."

"It will make me realise what a muddy world this is, and how impossible it is to go through it without getting spattered. I shall see the ghost at about this time one evening, and looking at him my life will seem like just one day, one rather long day. The small figure will be myself as I was at eight o'clock in the morning with my mother coming into the room and reminding me to say my prayers, and saying them first line by line for me to repeat, begging God to bless me and to keep me whiter than snow, and then—then I shall get up and look in the glass. Look in the mirror, and compare."

We were quiet for a few moments.

"This won't do," he cried, suddenly. "Is it my fault that we are becoming gloomy? Never shall it be said that I was the one to throw a wet blanket over the company.

Kitty, find a pack of cards. Those old country cards you used to have."

"Shall we play for money?" she asked, over her shoulder.

"Stimulates the game," said Mrs Latham, "to have a trifle depending on it."

"We will play for love," decided my brother. Kitty laughed. "Mrs Latham, if I can but win your undying affection, I shan't mind what sort of ghosts I meet."

"A caution you are!" declared the gratified lady. "You remind me of one or two gentlemen who used to come into the saloon bar on Sunday evenings!"

We settled details of the work, and before I ran home to tell my mother the great news. Len warned me there might be a considerable number of tasks for me to perform; if at any time I found these too extensive or too trying, I was to approach him and state the fact, and he would see that something was done. He relied upon me, and hoped I should not fail him.

"Good chap," he said, in going off. He patted my shoulder. "I may be able to repay you some day. When you find yourself in a corner, just you blow a whistle and I'll hurry up to your assistance." He kissed Mrs Latham's hand, and she delayed him at the front door to explain the chronological order and respective history of her numerous rings.

"Well," she said to me, returning, "if you aren't proud of a brother like that, all I can say is you ought to be perfectly well ashamed of yourself!"

Mother admitted I was right in saying she would begrudge the preparation of my evening meal, and I told her she must be careful not to stint herself in consequence, but to still arrange a good dinner and sit down and eat it; she shook her head and said it always seemed a waste to prepare for oneself, and assured me she could manage quite well on what the ladies upstairs left; this would enable her to make a saving in household expenditure. I called her a miserly

old party, and expressed a suspicion that she had somewhere a well-filled Post Office Savings Bank book ; she urged me not to make fun out of a serious matter. The prospect of co-operation between Len and myself gave her complete joy.

"He'll help you on, Henry," she said, confidently. "I'm not saying you're not doing well for yourself, and I don't blame you for not succeeding as well as your brother, because it always has to be kept in mind that he's one in a hundred."

"One in a thousand."

"More than that," she declared, "if the truth was known. I scarcely dare talk about him to the two young ladies, but I think a lot, and the woman you made me have to come here on Mondays to do the washing says, that if all I tell her about him is true, there's no reason why one day he shouldn't become——" My mother lowered her voice and spoke the words in awed tones.

"That's just exactly what I'm going to help him to be," I assured her enthusiastically. "I'm prepared to work till I drop, so that Len should realise his ambition. This is only the first stage that is coming. Let's have a look at that old photograph of the house at Blackheath."

We gazed once more at the family group on the lawn. My father, bearded and bare-headed, with Len, a small boy holding his hand ; a tiny figure on my mother's lap—

"You always were a mite, Henry."

—Behind us two nurses. Cords of a swing dependent from a tree ; the first hoops of croquet with a striped stick ; a square solid important house at the side with a verandah. Standard rose trees lining a broad gravelled path.

"And that's where Len is going to bring me to, before I die," said my mother, kissing the picture, "as sure as eggs are eggs. That reminds me—you might run down to the Broadway and get three ; one each for the ladies, and one for you !"

. . . . .



It has nothing to do with Len, but an incident happened about this time that will never go out of my memory. Preceded by a considerable taking of thought and cautious investigation it became, at one stage of the proceedings, something like a dream, so that I had to give myself a severe mental shake, and realise that it was being performed during my waking moments. This is what occurred.

A large long envelope, sealed on the flap, and fastened so accurately that it was not easy to insert a penknife came to the Shardeloes Road address. I placed the oblong green-covered book casually in my inside pocket, and went on with my breakfast with what was intended for easy composure; my mother, on a point of order, called attention to the irregularity of trying to take salt with a fork. On the way to the Latham's, I met three young men with whom I had nodding acquaintance and stopped each in turn, mentioning, after preamble, that I should have to find time to go to the bank. The announcement failing to disturb their calm, I repeated it in more emphatic tones.

"Well," said the first, "what of it? I suppose the old buffer leaves everything to you now."

"He still keeps all the money part of the business in his hands. As a matter of fact, I want to look in on my own account."

"Ho, ho!" in tones of congratulation. "Come to that, has it? Don't forget me in your will."

Kitty came into the office, and looked at everything on the desk, excepting the book which had been placed there in full view; I found it necessary, in order to attract attention, to request her not to touch it, and she at once took up the book. Kitty was in one of her restless moods, and instead of asking questions, replaced it, and went on to rustle through the contents of a file. I remarked that I should have to find time later, to go on the bank. She asked whether I had heard from Len, and I replied in the negative, adding that I should have to find time to go on to the bank.

"Let me sit here," she said, "whilst you are at your work." I found another high stool, and she perched herself atop swinging one slippered foot as she sat there. "Your manners are improving, Henry."

"And your temper."

"You think that?" she asked, eagerly. "I'm so glad. To tell you the truth, I've been doing my best to keep it under. And you notice that I'm different, do you? Do you think Len has noticed? Tell me!"

"I said you could sit, but I didn't tell you you could talk. Must get along with my work, or else I shan't find time to go on the bank. I want to look in, on my own account."

To my great annoyance, Kitty only said, "Oh!" and began to draw, on a blotting-pad, portraits of young men with unconvincing moustaches.

Late in the afternoon, I set about the important task. Made a rough copy on a memorandum, and taking a fresh nib, wrote very carefully on the first leaf of the book; under the signature I made a flourish, specially invented, and calculated to defy imitation. In detaching the perforated slips I, unfortunately, smudged one of the figures. The clock struck the half-hour, and fearful that I might arrive and find the doors closed in my face—thus postponing the wonderful operation until the morrow—I hastily wrote another and dashed out, only to be intercepted by a thousand and one inquiries, not one equalling in importance the task upon which I was engaged.

"Can you oblige me?" I panted, arriving at the counter. It was not the deportment I had arranged; the intention had been to lounge in carelessly, push the cheque under the brass protection, and say, "Let me have that, sharp, please," as though I had been in the habit of cashing cheques of my own for years past.

"Afraid not," said the bearded clerk, in tones of regret.

One could see, in a flash, that the worst had happened. My savings, placed in an establishment of good repute, had vanished; the bank had stopped payment; what the papers

would call a financial crash had occurred. It was clear the situation demanded courage, but calling upon it, I found my stock unable to answer the demand. I gripped at the brass wires, and put a question in fluttering tones.

"We're slaves to convention," explained the bearded clerk, handing back the cheque, "and old prejudices die hard. The rule is that we never give money in exchange for a cheque which isn't complete. Just you put your signature to it and it will be right. All gold?"

I have since cashed a good many cheques, but I do not know that I have ever succeeded in approaching a bank counter without trepidation, or retired from one without a certain amount of relief.

## CHAPTER XII

### LEN FORGETS TO THANK

ON the night the result of the election was declared—with the borough almost as greatly excited as it would have been over a like event of a political nature, private carriages about the main streets with inappropriate occupants, and hoardings covered with posters—Mrs Latham prepared elaborately, taking her chances, as she said, and determined to carry Len off to a late meal whether he were successful or not. She and Kitty had canvassed for him; the elder lady, I believe, giving reckless promises in regard to diminution in rates and when these failed, using threats, and although I gave them certain thoroughfares exclusively for their attention, they complained that other women were engaged on similar tasks, being evidently under the impression that their efforts, and their efforts alone would be sufficient. As a fact, we had a good deal of help from ladies who drove from town, of an evening, interviewing me as though I were a paid junior clerk and starting on their tasks with an enthusiasm which could not be expected to last. The Mrs Woodrow, once seen entering the Regent Street restaurant with Len and his friends, proved the best and most determined worker, and her ignorance of my relationship to the candidate permitted interchange of half-confidential remarks with companions on the motives for her energetic methods which at the time diverted me greatly. Two young women from Upper Berkeley Street made a formal report to my brother concerning my behaviour towards them; entrusted with a book and cards for two long streets, they returned within half an hour with a satisfactory note against every name, and their complaint against me was grounded on



the circumstance that I ventured to express a doubt whether, in the short period, they had really made a call and obtained a promise at every house.

"I'll deal with him in a suitable manner," Len said, appeasing them. "Thank you ever so much for your valuable help. If I succeed, I shall feel I owe it all to you."

And coming back after they had driven off, remarked privately,

"Soft soap, little man. Use soft soap, not hard yellow! Get one of the reliable people to go through those streets."

Difficult with these erratic assistants to judge prospects, and I found myself denounced as a kill-joy for hinting that we should be beaten by a small majority. An easy matter enough for folk to dance into the Committee Rooms at ten o'clock at night, when I had been at the harrying work for four hours, with four more hours in front of me, and talk in high voices, declaring (with no knowledge) that Len could not lose, that we were certain to knock the other side into a cocked hat, to give fatuous suggestions concerning placarding private houses, to bring some ridiculous rumour concerning the past life of our opponent and imagine it was a priceless contribution, and bounce out again in order to fulfil some less serious appointment in town, shouting encouraging assurances; I had to become the brake on this rapid movement in order that we might proceed safely and with proper circumspection.

Len looked rather tired of it all on the last day, and Mrs Woodrow's coachman before driving him round in her open carriage, mentioned to me that I myself should require fresh air and lively society 'ere regaining the appearance of an ordinary man. Mr Latham had been growing more useless at the office, worse than useless in dealing with outdoor matters, and for more than a month of week-days I found myself able to take no more than three hours sleep at night; on the Sundays I endeavoured to make up for this by taking a late breakfast in bed, accepting later from the two young

women lodgers an address on the subject of sloth. Towards the afternoon of the last day—Latham had given me the Saturday off—I awoke with a start in the Committee Rooms (which had a pronounced odour of oranges left behind by the last unsuccessful occupant of the shop) and found the last lines, written before dozing off, sloped in a foolish way down to the corner of the note-paper. Milly, on entering, adopted a pleasant method for arousing me; she changed her affectionate manner for one of distress, and running out came back with materials for the manufacture of beef-tea.

“Drink up every drop of it,” she ordered, emphatically. “I’d no idea it was taking it out of you like this. Why, you’ve lost all your colour!”

A great day, and my memory of it should be clear and distinct, but I can only see people rushing in and out of the converted fruit shop, hats on the backs of heads and losing their tempers and voices, can see the reverse side of the notices on the window headed—

VOTE THUS:

DREW

X

MARTINGALE

I can hear Milly saying now and again,

“Do you feel better, dear?”

And my answer that I was never in a sounder condition in all my life. The London women rustling in with “Mr Henry, will you please see to this at once?” and Mrs Woodrow protesting against unnecessary questions. The clock, going slowly, because I glanced at it so often, to eight o’clock, and presently everyone announcing with a sigh of relief that it was all over now, except the counting and the shouting. Len came in and flung himself on a second-hand sofa that had two bricks for the fourth leg, and told me he felt sure he had lost; this meant, he declared, that the people at head-quarters would look upon him as a hoodoo, one to bring misfortune to any other and more important

contest and likely to be passed over accordingly for some name possessing a greater appearance of luck. Len's depression had the effect of arousing me. Admitting that I, too, did not feel certain the result would be in his favour, at any rate, no one could say it had been a poor fight; few would dare to hint he had not done better than any one else could have done. Ernest Fowler was about taking impressions, and we could rely upon him for placing the candidature in a favourable light in one of the Monday morning papers.

"You're troubled, Len," I went on, "because you think your own folk will be disappointed. You musn't consider too much the feelings of other people."

His hands clasped behind his head, he turned on the second-hand sofa and looked at me curiously.

"Some complain of being misunderstood," he said, slowly, "I confess I rather like it. But it's just as well you should understand that I'm not at all the kind of person you imagine. I'm selfish; selfish all through. I don't care a hang about any one in this world, excepting myself. There isn't a man, woman, or child in this world I would consider for a moment in any situation where I myself am concerned." He jumped from the sofa and began to stride up and down; the rest had left us for a time, the street door was closed.

"I don't believe it, Len, and I'll tell you why. If you were what you describe yourself, how do you account for the fact that you have so many friends?"

"Haven't you discovered that trick, either? You're a dull dog, if ever there was one. Why it's the easiest matter to get friends if you only make it clear that you don't want them! I never approach new people on my hands and knees. I meet them amiably enough, but I manage to convey the impression that I don't greatly care if I see them again or not. When a closer acquaintance follows, I take an early opportunity of pointedly neglecting them. Sometimes, in extreme cases, I flout them. (Good old-fashioned word,

flout ; there's no other that quite takes its place.) Sometimes, as I've told you before, I drop them. Why, Henry, do you know the population of Great Britain and Ireland ? One could make fifty new friends to-day and throw them off to-morrow, and go on doing that all through one's life without exhausting the total number." He took up a paper-weight, and with a run, delivered it as one sends a cricket-ball, over arm ; it crashed through a window at the back of the shop. "Now come along and see how I accept defeat."

I felt glad one of the lent carriages stood outside. We drove through the crowded streets, where folk shopped as though no incident of great urgency was impending ; occasionally some one recognised my brother and started a cheer, and this would arrest the Saturday night chaffering, and the shouts would be taken up by young men on the top of a tram-car. I glanced at him as he raised his hat ; he was once again smiling, good-tempered, almost affectionate. A small crowd made way for our carriage, and as we stepped out a man smashed my hat down over my ears ; Len followed swiftly and made his way into the building, disregarding the mingled roar.

"Gentlemen," said the returning officer at the centre of a table, a quarter of an hour later, addressing those of us who stood about the room. We took off our hats and pressed forward, as he recited the formula, made the announcement.

"Ah !" we said, turning to each other at mention of the first name. "What did I tell you ?"

My brother's voice from the right of the table moved a vote of thanks, and said that he had thoroughly enjoyed the struggle. He begged to offer the hand of friendship to Mr Martingale in whom he recognised an honourable opponent, one worthy of better steel than he could provide. The honourable opponent declared he had done his best, hoped Mr Drew would recollect that a member appointed to the Council should represent the borough, and not merely the slightly preponderating number of voters who had polled for him ; Len said "Hear, hear !" with great fervour. The



returning officer begged to acknowledge the vote, and trusted he was not transgressing the bounds of official reticence and decorum in expressing the earnest hope that high honours were waiting for both candidates.

"Not both!" whispered the room.

Outside the hall, a thunder of cheers altogether disproportionate to the size of the crowd; at a club house near, some one writing the figures with a walking-stick dipped in ink.

"You are pleased?" said the folk around Len.

"I am pleased," he replied, "because it may give me a chance of doing some good to my fellow creatures."

"First," said Mrs Latham, hospitably, "first you're coming home with me and Kitty—and Henry can come, too—and you shall have something nice to eat and drink. Shan't tell you what there is, but you won't be disappointed."

"I am disappointed," he answered. "Deeply disappointed. For I foolishly promised some one to drive back to town."

"Mrs Woodrow?" asked Kitty in her sharp way.

"How clever of you to guess," he said.

He shook hands, thanking them, went around saying the exactly right word. A new roar told us the carriage had taken him off.

"He might have said a word to you, Henry," remarked Mrs Latham. "I'm sure you deserved it, if anybody did; fairly knocked up, you look; if it wasn't for the business, I should say you ought to get away for a bit. Kitty, you're looking pale too. Fact of the matter is— What's that?"

"I wish," said Kitty, with deliberation, "I very much wish he had been defeated!"

I talked all the way home in the tram-car, informing perfect strangers of the result, and wondering at the casual attention they gave. At Shardeloes Road, my mother, waiting at the front door, received my shouted news with

a delighted "No, not really!" and taking me in, made me give all the details.

"And he thanked you, Henry, for all you'd done. I'm sure Len wouldn't forget to do that."

"He was as nice as he possibly could be."

"Of course he was. And he sent a message to me?"

"A long message for you, mother." I let my head go slowly on one side, and fainted.

I must admit to feeling extremely proud both at the attention given, and at the fact that my slight illness was the result of working on behalf of Len. Neighbours called after church, and their voices, tuned in sympathetic key, came up from the passage with such phrases as "severe mental strain," and "change of air," and "burning the candle at both ends." Mrs Fowler brought along a volume called "The Household Physician," and she and my mother pored over it, endeavouring to ascertain the precise complaint which affected me, sometimes nearly securing a title, but baffled by a symptom that would not agree. Milly was not allowed to come upstairs—in itself a flattering circumstance—but the two waited upon me throughout the day with frequent appeals to confess I was feeling better; the lady lodgers conversed with me discreetly from the landing, prompted by such a determined resolution to cheer that I had to ask mother to induce them to cease. Ernest Fowler came late in the afternoon and read the descriptive article he had written about the County Council Election, and I insisted he should delete the reference to the candidate's brother. Ernest said he thought this would have gratified me; I pointed out to him that it would not gratify Len. Mr Fowler honoured our house with a visit, and I heard his deep voice remarking that the boy ought to get away for a bit; he thought he could, by exercise of what he called chickery-pokery, manage to obtain railway passes. My mother said, "But who's to go with him?" and Mr Fowler answered, "Why, you, ma'am, of course," and my mother said, "Good gracious, you're talking as though

I was a lady of title ; what next, I wonder ? I couldn't leave the house and fly off to the seaside ; you must be off your head, man, to suggest such a thing ! " Mr Fowler, leaving this, made a recommendation.

" I like the lad," he remarked, " or else I wouldn't think of interfering. It's all against my nature."

My mother said she knew what doctors were ; once they were allowed to put a foot inside the house, the trouble was to induce them to stop their visits, but Mr Fowler's voice rumbled on, and half-an-hour later Dr Viney of Amersham Road, who had recently attended Mr Latham, came up to the room and told me all about his wife's uncle of South America ; sent out there, it appeared, thirty years before because nothing could be done with him at home, and now returned simply covered with money from top to toe. Dr Viney asked nothing about my sensations, or the cause of my indisposition, and I thought he had forgotten all about the real object of his visit, but he sent in later a bottle of medicine, and I found he had told my mother a sea voyage would probably be necessary. We took this suggestion, and, in the pleasant, lazy time that followed, discussed the matter, whittling it down and reducing the expenditure involved. Mother had, with great trouble, written to Len, and every evening promised that he would be almost certain to come to see me.

Mr Fowler, when we had reduced Viney's recommendation to the lowest possible point, brought green slips which would frank me " and another " to Portsmouth and back. A delicate question arose. I wanted Milly to go with me, and my mother consulted Mrs Fowler, who said at once it would never do. To this, word was sent asking whether Mrs Fowler could manage to be my companion for the week ; the answer came that Milly's mother would have been only too pleased, but that Ernest had a birthday on the Thursday. My cousin at Peckham was tried ; she, it appeared, did not dare to lose sight, for so long a period, of her young gentleman, and Aunt Mabel endorsed this as

wise, and sane, and cautious on the part of her daughter. Mrs Latham called, and I ventured to put a suggestion before her.

"Been to Brighton often," she admitted, "but never Portsmouth. It would be rather nice to be able to say before I died that I'd been to Portsmouth. What do you think about bringing Kitty along?"

"Capital!"

"Couldn't trust her with many, but I could trust her with you. Only thing is, there's leaving Latham all to himself."

"You've got him in good training. By this time, I expect he's lost the taste for it."

"You see," she argued, as though in opposition, "it's all very well, but it would be to the advantage of the business to get you back, fit and well again. You may say what you like, but the truth is we can't manage very well without you. Saw a poster of ours the other day at the end of Malpas Road, and when I first caught sight of it, I really thought I'd gone off my head. Latham had passed by it a dozen times, and hadn't noticed it was the wrong way up."

"You and Kitty come away with me and look after me, and I'll guarantee that in less than no time I shall be ready for work again. We needn't stay in Portsmouth. We can take trips across to the Isle of Wight."

"In a steamer?"

"In a steamer."

"Not me!" replied Mrs Latham, with a shiver.

Thus it was arranged. An important gathering saw us off at New Cross Station, much as though we were Royalty going away for a considerable tour; Mr Fowler had reserved a compartment under the impression I was too weak to bear the presence of strangers. Milly cried, and my mother cried, because Milly cried. Ernest made a note on the back of an envelope, "The Platform Manner." Mrs Latham lifted a fore-finger to her husband as the train started, saying warningly, "Now mind!" and Mr Latham, flourishing his hat, replied, "Shan't forget, old dear!"



We certainly had an excellent time. I found I had greatly under-estimated Kitty; the early exuberance of manner had toned down, and on the journeys across to Ryde, and along the expensive little railway, she talked sensibly, and with a new manner of refinement. In the sun, and seated on the Esplanade at Sandown, one afternoon, I spoke to her of some extensions in the business, and she agreed that branches might be added; she liked the idea of calling the firm "Advertising Contractors," and listened interestedly to the account of consultations between Ernest and myself on the subject of relations with daily and weekly newspapers. Kitty was not sure her father would approve, without months of persistent argument, but thought that if I could get Len on my side and induce him to say a word to Mr Latham, the task would be easier, to which I replied that I had long since made up my mind never to bother Len, never to take up his valuable moments or obstruct him in any way; if one could help him, well and good, but I was determined not to trouble him with any sort of appeal to give assistance to me. Kitty went along to hear the Concertina King give his performance near the hotel, and a tall thin man, seated at the other end of the seat, folded up his morning journal and offered it to me. Impossible for him to avoid overhearing our conversation, and he hoped it would not be considered a liberty if he introduced himself. Mr Stenson, of Queen Street, Cheapside, down here for a mouthful of ozone, and going back on the morrow to enter into the thick of it once more in London. London gave you something, but was a bit inclined to be hard-fisted over the bargain, demanding a good deal in return. He gained I was interested in his own particular department of business, and speaking as one over forty to one not much over twenty—I felt greatly pleased by this slight exaggeration—urged me not to become a slave, never to allow the chains to be permanently fixed on wrists and ankles. For himself, he could admit that no matter where he happened to be, he talked advertisements, thought advertisements, dreamt advertisements. Could not

look at a white cliff without working out a scheme for securing it and arranging at once with a Meat Extract Firm, or a Soap Manufacturer; felt unable to glance at any prominent building, religious or secular, without a similar thought coming into his mind; gazing at the restive sea during the last half-hour he had found himself thinking, not of the shades of blue and green, but of a set of imitation life-buoys with the words conspicuously showing "Aregro Capsules for the Hair." I responded to all this by a description of my own work, and Mr Stemson nodded, suggesting an amendment only when I travelled beyond his powers of belief. He gave me his card, and I was able to offer him one that, owing to cheapness of production, had become slightly smudged. Mr Stemson asked me what I thought of the idea of kiosks along sea fronts illuminated at night, and we had a lively debate on the subject. I was so much accustomed to meeting only folk who had known me as a lad, that it proved particularly agreeable to be treated as an equal in years and understanding.

"Give me a call when you're in the City," he said, rising. "(I see your young lady is coming back for you.) Give me a call about lunch time. If any notions occur to you, drop me a word, and make an appointment."

I found myself becoming eager to get back to work, but Mrs Latham declared the change was doing me an immense amount of good, and in regard to Latham, why no news was good news. Kitty supported my resolution, until the Sunday morning, when I had written my daily letter to mother and to Milly, we strolled past bow-windowed terraces to the Floating Bridge, crossed to Gosport after gazing at H.M.S. *Victory*, and looked at the steam yacht *Annabel*, discussing its probable destination, wondering how much money it cost to keep going. We were about to turn away, and give others a chance of looking on, when an hotel omnibus arrived: my brother Len stepped down, turning at once to assist Mrs Woodrow, and leaving the rest to manage as they pleased. Kitty wanted me to call out,

but I said "No." Mrs Woodrow, apparelled for a sea-voyage, did not look attractive to our eyes, and Kitty whispered that she no longer felt jealous of her; some people near us decided Mrs Woodrow was Len's aunt, and that, judging by the nephew's attention, she had house property. A boat came alongside from the *Annabel*, and the entire party stepped in. Kitty and I sent a kiss as the yacht made its way out into the open.

After that, she did not encourage me in the desire to get back to town, preferring to remain where she could see the water and make guesses concerning the whereabouts of the *Annabel*. We laughed a good deal over Mrs Woodrow's appearance, prophesying that this would not improve as the voyage proceeded, and she made up some verses to the tune of "Weel may the keel row."

One afternoon Mrs Latham came running after us, fluttering a telegram and screaming as we were stepping across to the Ryde steamer. She was too breathless to say more, and I took the telegram from her.

"Return first train. Latham very seriously ill. May not last twenty-four hours. VINEY"

## CHAPTER XIII

### I POST A LETTER TO LEN

ONLY a stroke, said Viney, and when we echoed the remark reproachfully with emphasis on the first word, he said we ought to have seen the case of a man named Chesson in '88; the August of '88. Would Mr Latham recover, we asked? Viney replied by pointing out what a capital year it had been for strawberries; he had some growing on a kind of slope that caught most of the sunshine, and he could assure us, whether we cared to believe it or not, that a few specimens reached the proportions of a baby's fist. I followed him out of the house, and, after a deal of trouble, induced him for once to make a definite admission. There existed small likelihood, he said, at length, of the patient being able to leave his bed; no possibility that he would ever come out of his room.

Latham looked a queer, clumsy mass in the old-fashioned four-poster with hangings; he opened his eyes slowly, and when Kitty put her hand in his, kissing his forehead, he held it, and gave a look which meant that he desired her and no one else for companion. We cleared out the partly emptied bottles under the bed—"The master told me he was going to make up for lost time," remarked the servant, "but I thought it meant he was only going to take a quiet glass or two!"—and in the yard completely emptied them on a dust heap to the open disgust of two of our men who mixed paste before setting out; they referred pointedly to the motto of "Waste not, want not," adding that a blend made up of the varied contents would constitute the very beverage to make a chap's hair curl. Latham, it appeared, immediately



after the departure of his wife and daughter, sent an order to a merchant's in New Cross Road for a bottle of every known wine and every available spirit; one could imagine the gleeful anticipation with which the poor old fellow approached his task.

Here then was Kitty, almost a prisoner in the bedroom; here was Mrs Latham weeping bitterly, reproving me for taking them away to Portsmouth, and declaring the business would now go to rack and ruin; here was I with the duty of seeing that it went on as usual, or better. Some things he had always kept in his own hands, never permitting me or anyone else to have access to them, and I had to master these, to ascertain particulars of certain contracts entered into verbally (which could only be done by assuming perfect knowledge) and introducing a quiet revolution into the general methods. I admit I enjoyed all this, and especially did I relish the selection of a clerk from a set of lads just leaving the Board School; in the preliminary interview with my old master in Edward Street, I perhaps over-played the part and exhibited too much patronage, for he reminded me sharply of my age, and complained that I had not grown much since the day I left. A lad of Milton Court Road I selected, after subjecting him to a severe *viva voce* examination, in the course of which I discovered how much one had forgotten since school-days, finding myself compelled to fall back on geography of a more local nature, demanding to know which route he would take if sent from New Cross Gates to Brockley Tips, from Brockley Tips to the clock at Lewisham. The lad proved my equal here, admitting that much of his information had been gained whilst playing the game of hares and hounds. I told him there must be more sports so far as he was concerned; life was real, life was earnest— He deftly finished the quotation.

"I want you," I said, "to be assiduous, and well-behaved and civil."

"Right, sir!"

"Above all things," still under the impression that I was saying something original, "above all things, loyal."

"Can't sing, sir, if that's what you're driving at."

I went on from the schools to see the lad's mother whom I addressed, in the course of conversation as "My good woman!"

For some weeks I had to remind myself that it was necessary to appear grave and serious; relish of the sense of power, importance of calling on people with a free hand, reception of visitors who wanted to see Mr Latham—all these had to be hidden, and I practised, in the mirror set over the mantelpiece at office, an expression of gravity which sometimes slipped into ferociousness; Mrs Croucher meeting me one day, gave the highly satisfactory criticism to my mother that I was growing old before my time. Len returned from the yachting trip, and my mother pasted in the book all the reports of the "Scene at the Council" in which he had taken a spirited part; I wrote giving him the particulars of recent events, because Kitty was no longer able to send her daily letter, and Len took the trouble to send back a note, which I have always kept and shall always keep, congratulating me on the improvement in my situation, and sending an affectionate message of sympathy to Kitty. I told her the arrest of the communications was likely to be very useful in strengthening the bonds between herself and Len, and Kitty, admitting there might be something in the argument, assured me it was no easy task to refrain from writing to any one whom you loved. The truth of this I discovered for myself when Milly went away for three weeks to an aunt in Devonshire.

There existed an inducement, now that I was general commanding, not only to show considerable austerity in dealing with the men, and a cold aloofness towards the youthful clerk, but also to adventure into new forays, to make some dashing attack in a fresh direction. Here, Ernest Fowler acted as wise counsellor, and it proved im-

possible to deny that he, formerly a youth who changed opinions more frequently than he changed shirt cuffs, had become a clear-headed person, able to give good advice and give it swiftly. (I envied him at this period because he was singularly favoured, not only in the circumstance that he was making golden guineas out of his contributions to the Press, but in the fact that his hair was becoming thin on the top, a conjunction of fortunate incidents that dowered on one man seemed to me hardly just.) To him were submitted several plans for extending the business, such as transferring the office to New Cross Road and opening there an agency for advertisements in public journals; the securing of contracts for catalogues and the printing of these with the aid of a staff of artists able to draw anything from Chippendale chairs to young women in corsets; complete control of some trade paper; an arrangement with the tramway companies for the space available inside and outside of their cars. Without pretending that the ideas were good, one can fairly say they were numerous; most of them came to me in the mornings when I was shaving.

"You met a man named Stemson down in the Isle of Wight," interrupted Ernest.

"My dear chap," I said, "I hope you give me credit for some sense. I'm not likely to be imposed upon by a chance acquaintance of that kind. For all I know or you know, he may have been simply humbugging, just as I was."

"I know a man who wants to be a doctor," he went on.

"Different matter altogether."

"And he tells me that there's the choice of starting a new practice and trying to make it pay, and the choice of scraping every penny together and buying one which is already in existence; the first he says is tiresome up-hill work and many struggle on without ever reaching the top. Now you are talking about making a similar attempt. For one thing Latham is still alive, and I don't know that you have the power and I'm not sure that you have the right to splash

out with his money; in the second place it seems highly probable that with your limited experience——”

“I’m getting tired of that phrase!”

“With your limited experience you may come a cropper, you may break your neck, you may find yourself left on the cold, hard snow. You Drews have got all this ambition, or daring, or whatever you like to call it, in your blood, but you ought to remember where it dumped your father in the end.”

“It won’t be long before Len is in the house at Blackheath.”

“A young colt like you is capable of good work, but you ought to be harnessed to a steady-going horse. I can’t tell you whether Stemson of Queen Street is the kind of partner you want, but if I were in your place, and if I had all your notions, I should go and see him.”

I had to call on a firm in Queen Victoria Street, shortly after that with estimates for the posting in South-East London of a bill with a picture of Napoleon crossing the Alps in a pair of their nine and elevenpenny boots. Noting the name of a street that went across in the direction of Southwark Bridge, I searched for Mr Stemson’s number, and going up in a lift found his offices. They were what is called well appointed, with leather couches and plenty of newspapers; I made mental comparison between them and the office of Latham & Co, and a good deal of confidence went out at finger-tips. Mr Stemson was not in, said one of the gentlemanly clerks, was indeed out at lunch, and the clerk did not feel justified in stating the hour he would be likely to return. Where did Mr Stemson usually take his midday meal? The clerk politely regretted that this information was not in his possession.

There were two or three likely looking restaurants near, but it would have been undignified to go in and look around; the disappointment was to be regarded as an omen that Mr Stemson and I were not to do business together. In an underground tea-room, gained by diving steeply from



the pavement, I ordered a cup of white coffee and a scone ; the waitress turning to the customer on the other side of the table remarked—

“Let me see, you said a coffee and a scone, too, didn’t you?”

“If you don’t mind,” he answered, deferentially.

“But one of your clerks,” I exclaimed, turning to him, “told me you were having lunch.”

“I am,” replied Mr Stemson. “Why, it’s the little fellow I met at Sandown. How are you? Can you play draughts?”

We had a game, and he beat me and passed his ticket over as indication that I had to settle for his refreshment. He said this constituted the only diversion and the one exercise he permitted himself ; a single game with a worthy opponent enabled him to go back refreshed to his work. At other tables junior clerks were talking loudly of impending feats in cricket and speaking with tones of patronage about Yorkshire ; some of their elders conversed in lower tones on the topic of ladies, and how to win them ; Mr Stemson, owner of the fine offices I had seen, sat opposite to me speaking in mournful tones of the consequences that resulted when, a week previously, he had taken, to oblige an important client, in the day-time, three whiffs at a cigarette.

“Let me see,” he said, after promising to consider my sage advice to leave tobacco alone in future. “What were we talking about when we last met? I remember I was interested in you, but, for the life of me, I can’t recollect why.”

I refreshed his memory, taking care to adhere carefully to exact truth. Explained the work at present being done by Latham’s, hinted at my views and desires regarding the future. Mr Latham might go off at any moment and, regretting his loss for many reasons, one wanted to make sure it would not mean looking for work.

“Have you any capital?”

"Fifteen pounds twelve."

"That's something," he said with gravity, "but it is not what, in the City, would be called a feather bed to fall back upon. What you want, I suppose, is to find a man who will make a bid for the Latham business and keep you?"

"Amalgamating it perhaps with his own."

"There are not many idiots this side of Temple Bar," he remarked, regretfully.

"Can't you consider it, Mr Stemson?"

He looked at me for a time, and then shook his head. "Shouldn't know where to put my hand on the cash," he declared, mournfully. "If anyone came to me at the present moment and asked me for five shillings, I should have to go and borrow it from one of my clerks. That's a fact! The little I have is all out, and if I tried to realise any of it I should find it had all vanished like——" He pointed to the smoke from a neighbour's cigar.

"If I were you, I should want to leave something for my wife and children."

"When a man has neither," he replied, "he has no incentive to make money. How much do you think they would ask for the business?" I named a figure. "Gracious!" he exclaimed, in a shocked manner, and putting on his hat walked slowly out and up the staircase.

It seemed difficult to guess whether he expected me to follow or not, but I did not move, and Ernest Fowler was good enough to hint in the evening that he applauded my reserve. Ernest, reminding me of a previous experience, said that in business preliminaries of the kind, a certain coyness always had to be expected, and the highest art consisted in pretending not to want to sell, when you eagerly desired to sell; to affect a similiar indifference when anxious to buy; he prophesied a letter would come from Stemson & Co., at the moment when the firm decided that Latham's did not intend to take the next step. A letter did come a week later, signed by E. W. Rentworth, Managing

Clerk, saying he was instructed by Mr Stemson to say that if I happened to be in the neighbourhood during the course of the following month, would I be so good as to favour him with a call; on the counsel of Ernest, for whose new sagacity I was beginning to entertain a regard, a reply went that the claims of business and the continued illness of my superior would prevent me from coming to the City for some considerable time; I begged to thank him for his letter, and remained his obedient servant. It was reported to me that two men had been observed going about the neighbourhood, noting the extent and quality of our stations, and the number and value of the posters; they interrogated my informant who replied that since the governor had been ill, the business had gone up by leaps and bounds. Mr Stemson wrote a friendly note in his own handwriting, requesting the favour of my company to take pot-luck with him at seven o'clock on Thursday, the twenty-first, in the garret he occupied at Palace Court, Bayswater. Not evening dress.

"Don't ask me," wailed Mrs Latham, irritably, when I tried to acquaint her with the condition of affairs. "I'm pestered nearly out of my mind as it is. You must do what you think best."

"Have I your permission to do so?"

"Do go away," she implored. "Surely you're old enough to take some cares off my shoulders; if you don't feel capable of looking after everything, why we'd better shut up at once. You're not going to fail us in the hour of need, Henry."

I had no wish to do anything of the kind; all one wanted to do was to feel certain that whatever happened she and Kitty would not turn round and blame me.

"Come upstairs," she said, "and let's see if we can get any sense out of him."

Kitty looked pale, and this was nothing to be surprised at for she had been in close attendance on her father for several weeks, taking her meals in the room and declining the

suggestions made that she should sometimes go for a walk. Mr Latham was asleep ; in a corner the three of us consulted in undertones.

"I don't want to think," whispered Kitty, glancing affectionately at the pillow, "that we're going to lose him. He's the only relative I have, and he's always been a dear, good father to me."

"Last person in the world," declared Mrs Latham, "to wish anybody any harm, but you must admit he's only in the way."

"He's not in my way," retorted the girl, sharply.

"Oh ! indeed," remarked the other. "You haven't the intelligence to see that you're not only losing time, but you're also losing some of your good looks."

Kitty rushed across to the dressing-table, and examined the reflection of her features apprehensively. The movement aroused the old man, and I went to the bed-side. His eyelids made two or three efforts before they succeeded in remaining open, and when he recognised me, a slow smile went around his mouth ; he tried to speak and I wiped his lips with Kitty's handkerchief. Bending, I explained the situation as briefly as possible, urging him to say what he wished me to do and to mention the sum to be asked ; it was impossible to see whether he understood, and Kitty, returning, endeavoured to make the matter clear to his comprehension. He gave a long sigh, and the large old head went aside wearily.

"No use, little brother-in-law," she whispered. "If you have the courage, do just as you think he would do, and make up your mind to stand the consequences. And tell me, do you think I am going off in my appearance ? Do you think Len would think so ? Tell me candidly. It won't make any difference in my manner to father."

I re-assured her, mentioning that Len was not the kind of man to allow his affection to change because a girl behaved devotedly to her parent. He might not be demonstrative, but once Len had given his word, it would require something in the nature of an earthquake to induce



him to alter. I am afraid I invented a remark alleged to have been made by Len to me, concerning her looks, to the effect that a slight pallor would constitute an improvement ; Kitty went back cheerfully to her monotonous task at the bed-side.

Mr Stemson's garret consisted of a suite of rooms on the second floor, in Palace Court, and pot luck proved a meal of astonishing dimensions and gorgeousness, with three maid-servants waiting at table and an aunt seated at one end who, having ascertained that I claimed no relationship to a peer of a somewhat similar name, made no attempt to conceal obliviousness to my presence. Mr Stemson's frugality during the day seemed part of an elaborate plan to encourage and preserve keenness for the evening meal, but he persisted in bewailing a want of appetite, and before the meal urged me to join him in a bitters ; without the assistance of this, he declared, he would be unable to so much as glance at a single dish without a feeling of deep repulsion. A finer trencherman, once knife and fork set to work, I never wish to see. His aunt, from her end of the table, warned him more than once when he apologised for keeping us waiting whilst he returned his plate for a second help, that he would suffer for his extravagance, but he replied in a manner which, for him, neared the point of joviality, that he did not care, and that a slight attack of indigestion formed small punishment when such an excellent cut of lamb was about. I had never before been in a house where so much luxury existed : it reminded me of accounts my mother sometimes gave of the establishment at Blackheath, and when I had opened the door for the aunt, who said, absently—

“Thank you, Lord Crewe.”

—I went back to take her comfortable chair and drag it towards Mr Stemson with all my confidence restored ; prepared to talk on equal terms with any one belonging to the City of London. I did not dare to take one of the black cigars which Mr Stemson offered ; he mentioned in explanation of their amazing length, that his medical man

had ordered him to restrict himself to one and only one, after dinner.

"Before we have a chat," holding my claret up to the light in a style that I discovered later went out about twenty years before, "I want to tell you that everything must stand over for a time. Apart from that, I've been going very carefully into details, and the sum mentioned to you——"

"Look here, young Drew," he said, sharply. "I'm accustomed to dealing with business matters in a business-like way. You gave me a figure, and I can't prevent you from cancelling the offer or doing anything else you like to do, but I may have the opportunity, in course of time, of paying you out, and it's only fair to say this is the course I shall certainly pursue. I'm a man with a lot of irons in the fire, and some of them are red-hot. When I take one out to use, you can be pretty sure it is not I who am going to play pantaloons."

"Don't want you to think I'm behaving unfairly, Mr Stemson."

"Behave just as you please," he retorted.

"Supposing I managed to persuade the parties concerned, what would be my position?"

It astonishes me even now to regard my composure that evening during the hour's conversation; to be just, some of the credit should be given to the wine. Looking back I can hear myself interrupting with "That's all very well, but—" and "You'll excuse me, but I think you lose sight of—" and "I don't agree with you at all." By half-past nine we had settled everything, and I feel sure that with one more sip of Burgundy, I should have experienced a sudden fit of youthful candour, confessing the terms obtained were far better than I had expected. Instead, I suggested we should go into the drawing-room, where the aunt, now disregarding my early denials, begged me to tell her, in confidence, whether there was any truth in the veiled statements hinted at in society journals concerning Lady Violet Maberly.

I authorised her to give the scandal flat and complete contradiction.

It appeared to me an evening for walking home, and Mr Stemson conceded that, if he were wise, he would accompany me across the park; this would be excellent for his health but he decided, after consideration, to go straight to bed; as we became better acquainted, I was to induce him, gently, to take exercise. I found myself on the old track, recognising all the signs in Old Kent Road from *The World Turned Upside Down* to the Rising Sun; identified once more the churches and chapels, and keeping a wary look-out for hoardings. I told my favourites amongst the nine hundred houses that I was hurrying on in the world, getting a trifle nearer, in the race, to my brother. The hour was late, but three people had to be told of the success of my great commercial undertaking; I went first to Milly's house where the family, waiting up, received the news with gratifying compliments, declaring that my clothes had the scent which clung to garments worn by men about town; before going on to my mother and to rest, I strode across to Hatcham. There a light showed through the brown blinds of poor old Latham's room, and in collecting small pebbles I thought of the time that must come to everyone when, retiring on half pay from active service, or on no pay at all, they have to endure the knowledge that younger people are taking up the fight.

"That you, Henry?"

"Yes, Kitty. Everything's gone capitally. Tell you about it in the morning, but I thought you'd like to know."

"So glad. Post this letter to Len." I caught the note as it fell from the window. "I've asked him to call, but I don't know whether he will or not."

"Bet you sixpence he calls before the month is out."

"Hope I lose," she said, fervently.

Their meeting proved to be one of the few occasions when I was able to give good advice to Len. It seemed to my mother and myself the moment had arrived when it was

necessary to give a party, and invite the Peckham relatives, the Fowlers, some friends of mine and their sisters, to all of whom I had become indebted for hospitality. My opinion (dogmatically explained in discussing such preliminaries as claret, sandwiches, the clearing out of the front room, and a white drugget over the carpet) my own opinion was that we could safely invite many more than we desired to be present, and a high stroke of diplomacy consisted in selecting a Saturday night when many were likely to have urgent engagements. As the replies came in, all beginning with either "Delighted to accept—" or the more formal and precise "So-and-so presents compliments and begs to say that it will give great pleasure—" my mother took a grave view of the situation, going so far as to recommend that one of us should, at the last moment, simulate illness; she felt unable to look forward with equanimity to the prospect of seeing the guests submitting to the treatment experienced by sardines. To this I demurred—being now of the age when any argument advanced by a parent seemed to demand flat contradiction—and offered to transform the kitchen, with my own hands, into something like a boudoir, to which couples might retire for conversation and rest. This scheme drove my mother and Mrs Croucher into the scullery; Mrs Croucher remarked caustically that it seemed a pity, whilst we were about it, not to take the New Cross Public Hall and do the thing well; as an alternative she suggested a marquee in Greenwich Park. I took an afternoon off in order to direct affairs at Shardeloes Road; lost my temper half a dozen times and recovered it; helped to bring in rout seats and to shift furniture, snatched at a cup of tea; fussed about with a hammer doing scarcely anything with great determination; inspected the commissariat arrangements and gave several hints of no value whatever; ran on errands and forgot the object; behaved generally as one on the very edge of mental failure.

"Now you look here, Henry," said my mother, definitely. "If you don't go straight upstairs and wash and dress, your Milly will come and catch you in your shirt-sleeves."



Thanks, not to myself but to the others, we were all ready, lights up, fires burning well, scarlet shades on candles, and a scent of Tangerine oranges pervading the house, before the first knock came. There had been time to instruct Mrs Croucher in the task of announcing guests, and to persuade her to commit the names to memory, a sheer waste as it proved for the brief interval between accepting and delivering them, in a loud voice to us, enabled her to give her own version; Kitty became (to her intense annoyance) Miss Nathan, the Fowlers became the Growlers, and some people called Smithers were announced as—

“Mr and Miss Sniffer.”

When I remonstrated, privately, she told me, publicly, that if I thought I could do it better, I had her permission to take the job on myself. Milly gave me a glance of warning, and turned the disasters to account by insisting they should all retain for the evening the names given; a forfeit to be paid by any one who slipped back into accuracy. Milly it was too who first played, taking a position that no one else seemed anxious to occupy, and on the delicate question arising of who should be at the pianoforte whilst dancing was in progress, Milly declared her intention of giving up the music stool to nobody; to my objection that this would leave me without a partner she instructed me, in an undertone, in the duties of a host, one of which appeared to be that he was expected to dance with every lady guest.

“I didn’t know, Milly.”

“You have a great deal to learn,” she said. A remark which considerably increased my astonishment.

“Len coming?” asked Kitty Latham, as we met in the rather cramped quadrilles.

“Your usual question.”

“Answer me, please.”

“Of course, he isn’t coming.”

“You might have told me that before.”

The crowd was certainly great, and my mother's anxiety that everyone should be able, if so minded, to sit down perturbed her greatly, but she observed, after a while, that everyone rather enjoyed the circumstance of being a unit in a considerable number, a relish, I have since found, not restricted to New Cross. The pressure was eased when a few couples strolled away to the transformed kitchen, where a screen masked the cooking range, and basket chairs gave an appearance of elegant ease; the sneeze with which my mother was afflicted at the doorway when she had occasion to go through, enabled couples to take up unconvincing attitudes of decorum.

We were talking about Len, my mother and I in duet, with assistance from Kitty, when at the front door came knocking, that instead of halting after three or four raps went on in a mad, tempestuous fashion. Mrs Croucher was summoned, and fluttered through the passage. We counted the guests and could not discover that any were missing. Confused voices at the open front door.

"Your eldest," announced Mrs Croucher, "and I think he's boozed."

Len stayed about twenty minutes, seated on the sofa in the corner, his arm around Kitty's waist and talked without a stop during the whole of the time. The entertainment was arrested, and our guests stood about watching him, half inclined to show amusement when he found himself in a difficulty with certain words, but the sight of my mother's face checked them.

"Can't stop longer," he said, presently, attempting to rise. "Must be off. Give us kiss, Miss Latham."

I put on my over-coat, and told him I would walk so far as the station. Outside, he gripped my arm, and I persuaded him to give up the effort of pushing a gate which required to be pulled.

"What do you mean," I demanded, warmly, "by coming here in this state? Do you know that you've spoiled my party?"

"Lil' man 'noyed?"

"I am extremely annoyed," I declared. Wondering, all the while, at my courage in speaking to him in this way.

"I don't know what possessed you to do it. Most unkind."

"Mos' unkind?"

"Look here, Len. Can't you pull yourself together? Can't you sober yourself and come back and pretend it was a lark. Think of mother!" I added, appealingly.

He did not speak until we were near a chemist shop in Lewisham High Road, when he gave me an order. I brought out the small glass and he drank the contents; stood at the railings for a few moments with his hat off. Then straightened himself, did this wonderful brother of mine; led the way, returning to Shardeloes Road. At the door, he took a pocket-comb from his pocket.

"Now for the second syllable," he remarked, cheerfully, re-entering the crowded room. "Mother, you don't mean to say you couldn't see I was only pretending? Awfully sorry if I over-did it."

Kitty asked me next day to tell her the truth. My reply compelled her to remark that one might as well try to get secrets from a brick wall.

## CHAPTER XIV

### LEN WALKS WITH ME

THE world began to move, and this period can be looked upon as the one where I really turned back my sleeves. Failure in the initial effort ought to have made it difficult to regain self-confidence ; as it was, I showed, no doubt, an undue amount of assurance. The great advantage came in the possession of a free hand. With Mr Latham upstairs, taking interest only in his daughter Kitty (his eyes as she went about the room followed her slowly, so that he was sometimes gazing at the fire-place when she had returned to the bed-side) there was no one interfering in the arrangements made between Cheapside and Hatcham. Two things proved specially gratifying ; one that my mother no longer considered it necessary to shake her head over my proceedings and to warn against failure, the other that at Queen Street I was allowed to walk straight to the inner fortress without parleying at the drawbridge. One can guess what the clerks there thought of the introduction of a bumptious outsider (I, in their place, should have thought as they did), but the friendliness shown by Mr Stemson induced them to refrain from any open protest. An incident which helped me, even in their view, was the matter of a prize offered by some Printers' Institute for the most attractive and artistic advertisement ; to be candid, it seemed scarcely possible mine was the most artistic, for I had only taken enough drawing lessons to ensure the correctness of perspective but, to be equally candid, the idea was a good one, and Ernest Fowler ought to have accepted my offer of one half of the amount. I told him it would be my duty and my pleasure to do him a turn later on, and from this it will be seen



that so far as New Cross was concerned, I assumed, at this time, an air of patronage.

In the same spirit, I informed the two lady lodgers one evening that they would be acting wisely in looking about for new quarters ; they wailed aloud, declaring they could never find another place to suit them, and this in spite of the fact that they had scarcely ceased to grumble from the moment of entering the house a few years previously. My mother coming in from the task of using a water can in the garden begged to be informed what the row was about, and I told her a senior clerk of Queen Street was to be transferred to New Cross to take charge of the Latham branch, exercise control over the junior whom I had hitherto lorded, and to command the outdoor staff. She requested the two ladies to retire from the conference ; they obeyed with handkerchiefs at eyes.

"Now, Henry, my dear," she said, folding the hem of the table-cloth carefully, "me and you are not going to have any dispute, because you're nearly a man, and I'm nearly an old woman. You wanted to go away once before, and I'm afraid you changed your mind only to please me. So you're going to decide just as you like because you know best—and I do believe that's the first time I ever made the remark to you, although, often, often I've said it to Len—you know best, and I'm not going to stand in your light in any way whatsoever. But I've mapped out my life, and, if you don't mind we'll let it go on just as I've meant it to go. If you take me up to London, and we go into rooms, I shall simply be a fish out of water. There won't be enough for me to do ; I shall get interfering with the landlady, if there is one, and it'll be nothing but rows, rows, rows, morning, noon, and night. Here, I am my own mistress, and I've got the two young ladies to look after ; they like ordering me about of an evening, and I like being ordered about. They pay regular, and I don't mind telling you that I've put by a bit and—" her head trembled with pride, "I can manage. Haven't troubled Len for a long time, and now I needn't trouble you !"

I protested. I should always insist on making a weekly contribution.

"Well, you can begin," she conceded, "as Len did, and when you get tired or forget, you can stop, as he did. To tell you the truth, Henry, I was a bit upset when he left off so quickly, but it's worked out all right, and I know as well as you do he's going to make it up for me. Till that time comes, I'm quite willing to wait. He won't be long! I shall stay on here until he drives up in his carriage and pair, and gives a loud rat-tat at the door and I open it, and he gives me a hug and a kiss and says, "Come along, mother, I've bought the old house at Blackheath, and you're going to live with me there!"

"He'll be married by that time, mother."

"I've watched the girl," she replied, precisely, "and I see great improvements. At one time I thought she was too flighty—she certainly don't compare with Milly—but she's improved, or else I have, or else both, and I foresee we'll pull together all right. I shall have the room nearly at the top of the house that your poor father used to call the library, and if so be as the children get fond of me why——"

My mother wiped her eyes, and went up the staircase to put an end to the suspense endured by the two ladies.

Thus it was settled. In a journal devoting itself to the letting of houses and rooms, I found an address in Tavistock Place, Bloomsbury, which seemed to have lingered in the recesses of my memory, and taking Milly up there late one afternoon, we found these were the identical apartments which Len, for a space, after leaving Osnaburgh Street, occupied; the landlady explained proudly that Mr Drew had grown too big for them. Informed by Milly of my relationship to Len, the woman—a tall refined person, one not in the least resembling the Bloomsbury landladies of tradition, and glancing at me sharply when I nearly missed an aspirate—said no references would be required; some of the furniture

left behind by my brother could be placed at my disposal ; she wondered I had not been amongst the many visitors the other Mr Drew entertained. The sitting-room had two long windows reaching to the floor from which one could see a corner of the square (Milly declared that Bloomsbury squares were, at their best, as beautiful as anything in London) the bedroom was reached through folding-doors or, if I preferred, these could be closed and the pianoforte placed there. A swift shower coming on as we talked the landlady sent up tea and toast for us, and Milly played something out of *The Gondoliers*, and we kissed each other to the joy of our respective hearts, until we found that a small crowd of children had assembled on the pavement at the opposite side of the roadway ; they gave a groan of disappointment when we showed their presence had been recognised. Milly held private conversation with the landlady concerning the weekly rent, and was able to announce that, by representing the small amount of attendance I should require, by guaranteeing that only one pair of boots would be placed outside the door nightly, and by giving generous testimonials concerning the excellence of my character and general behaviour, she had succeeded in reducing the amount by eighteen pence. We went on afterwards, I remember, to the Savoy Theatre, occupying such important seats that Milly had to take her hat off ; on the way home in the train we hummed the melodies. (Yesterday a piano-organ started one of them as I began to write and there was sent out, from sheer thankfulness, half a crown ; the Italian lady, to my regret, misinterpreted my intention and moved the instrument to a point well out of hearing.)

I took the earliest opportunity of writing at full length to Len on note-paper that bore the new address, and he replied congratulating me on following in his footsteps, but warning me to be careful in dealing with Mr Stemson ; Len had some transactions with him at one time, and regretted it deeply. This perturbed me until, having ordered one of the clerks to look up the incident, I found Len had disputed

payment for work honestly done, and indeed never paid a penny for it; one could not well see, in these circumstances, of what he had to complain. Mr Stenson behaved fairly to me, and went so far one day to throw off his usual reserve and admit I was a man with a head, under which encouragement I increased my efforts to discover valuable suggestions. These came most generously in walking about London alone of an evening, especially when one became accustomed to the streets and could tramp without being allured by any shop windows, excepting those of booksellers. The bookshops had a special interest for me when Ernest Fowler brought out a book of short stories with a dedication on the front page to "My Friend, Henry Drew"; a natural interest encouraged me to assist the demand by going into discount shops and asking, "Do you happen to have a book called 'Intermediate Tales' that I hear talked about a good deal"? and when the assistant answered in the negative but offered to obtain it for me, the reply was that I wanted it for a particular purpose at the very moment; when they produced the volume I looked at the pages and said, "Beg your pardon, got the title wrongly; should have said 'Elevating Anecdotes,'" to which the assistant could only respond that he had never heard of such a book, and I, expressing regret at the incomplete stocking of the establishment, withdrew. Mentioning to Ernest that I could not understand where he found his plots, he reciprocated by declaring wonder at the fertility of my notions. It will be guessed that we were both gaining something in courtesy manners; the boyish plan of crude frankness had departed.

Ernest sat at the left-hand of the Chairman when the New Cross staff gave me a farewell supper. I wanted Len to occupy the position; his letter annoyed Milly, who declared he seemed to be under the impression that no one had a right to get on in the world but himself; I pointed out to her that the note had clearly been written in a hurry and begged her to read between the lines, drew special attention to the postscript which said, "Shall soon want your help



again." In regard to this, Milly declared with emphasis that I had once made myself seriously ill by over-working on behalf of Len, and she would not dream of allowing me to repeat the blunder. She agreed, with equal decision of manner, to my remark that we looked at Len from two entirely different points of view.

The newspaper extract before me has two head lines—"Gratifying Incident at New Cross. Departure of Mr Henry Drew," which occurred to me, at the time, as one of those statements which might be more adroitly expressed. Concerning the rest of the report my mother declined to discover any fault, and a marked copy went to Len, to Aunt Mabel at Peckham, to the married cousin, and to less immediate relatives.

"We hear much in these days of enmity between Capital and Labour, and it is interesting therefore to note that in our neighbourhood this feeling is singularly absent. Only on Thursday evening last at that well-known hostelry 'The Marquis of Granby,' so admirably situated as to form a landmark, a farewell supper was held by the staff and friends of the well-known and enterprising firm of Messrs Latham Bros., to Mr Henry Drew of Shardeloes Road, on his taking up a new position with a notable London firm of advertising agents with whose business that of Latham Bros. has recently been amalgamated. A *recherché* meal having been done full justice to, the cloth was removed, and—

"Mr THOMAS WILLS said this was 'an occasion when mirth was mingled with sorrow. He had first to express regret that the state of Mr Latham's health prevented him from being present, and from taking the chair which he (Mr Wills) so unworthily occupied. (No, no.) Mirth was mingled with sorrow because, whilst on the one hand they were here to congratulate a gentleman young in years, but he ventured to say old in wisdom (hear, hear), to congratulate him on a well-deserved advance; on the other hand they condoled with themselves in losing him. (Cheers.) There might have been

times, he for one did not wish to deny it, when a certain amount of argument took place over this, that, or the other, and he himself had gone so far as to express the opinion that Mr Henry Drew was too big for his hat. He begged to withdraw that assertion. (Cheers.) He now looked upon the guest of the evening as one who could see further through a brick wall than most people, and everyone ought to be anxious to give credit where credit was due. Far was it from him to say a word against absent friends, but facts were facts, and it had to be stated that the staff of Messrs Latham Bros. had been nearly doubled since Mr Drew took complete charge. On behalf of those assembled to do him honour, he (the Chairman) begged to tender every wish for continued success. (Loud cheers.)

"The Chairman here handed to the guest a handsome plush-lined case containing twelve knives and forks, expressing a humorous wish that these might not sever friendship, and that the future Mrs Drew would not blame them for giving her something extra to keep clean.

"Mr HENRY DREW, in rising to respond, received an extraordinary ovation, together with musical honours. We deeply regret that exigencies of space prevent us from giving his speech *in extenso*; suffice it to say that he reviewed in a masterly way the subject of advertising from its earliest stages, mentioning a curious and little-known fact in connection with recently discovered papyri in Egypt. Coming to modern days he declared his belief that we were on the eve of a great movement when men would no longer be content with hiding their light under a bushel, but would set the bushel, bottom upwards, and the light on top. Business firms were beginning to recognise that they must in future act in a business-like manner, and where soap and pills had led, other trades he felt certain, would eventually follow. He thought our public hoardings would become as useful in their way as the National Gallery; contended the advertisement pages of our great public journals could be made, by dexterous handling, as attractive as those which contained the news of

the day. In conclusion, he begged to propose 'Literature,' coupling with the toast the name of one already distinguished in the world of letters.

"Mr ERNEST FOWLER, having responded in a brief, but amusing speech, gave 'Mine Host' and the respected proprietor returned thanks for the compliment in a voice broken with emotion. The rest of the evening was given up to melody in the course of which it was proved that those who wield the paste-brush are by no means devoid of musical talent, Mr Buckmaster obliging, by request, with 'Jim Crow.' A most enjoyable evening closed with 'Auld Lang Syne,' the entire company crossing arms in the approved manner."

My admirable landlady at Tavistock Place only intruded herself upon me once a month, bringing then a small black book, and leaving it, in conversing, near the writing-table, as though the rent were a matter of no importance; on these occasions, the talk always went (after preliminaries concerning weather, increase in rates, desirability of effecting a change in the Government) to the subject of Len. She made comparisons between us, pointing out that whereas he was never at home in the evenings excepting for the purpose of entertaining friends, I was always at home in those hours, bringing work from Queen Street, and that my powers of entertaining friends had not yet been tested. I tried to find from her the names of people who came to the house in Len's time but, a model of discretion, she replied this was no business of hers, that she was always prepared to allow young gentlemen, in their selection of acquaintances, a certain amount of latitude; the choice was either to do this and retain them, or to fall back on lady lodgers who would be ringing the bell in their rooms every hour of the day. The two servants could give me no information because they were new since Len's time, but one night in searching for space that would take some original drawings which I wanted to hold over, I found the sofa was also a long trunk with the lid made to open, and therein discovered

a number of photographs, evidently forgotten by my brother, and endorsed conspicuously with affectionate inscriptions. Also, in a corner of the sofa-trunk were bundles of letters, the top envelope of one in Kitty Latham's handwriting. I made a neat parcel of the entire lot and sent them on to Len at his club; he acknowledged receipt on a note dated from his new rooms. Fine to look at the address, and to think that my own brother lived there; something discouraging in the reflection that one could never catch up a man who advanced at this rate. Woodpecker Road, S.E., to Park Place, W., in about six years; it was quick travelling, and no one but Len could expect to make such a swift pace. In the note he said—

“Thanks for contents of package: if you find anything else of the kind, please burn and thus save troubling Parcels Delivery. The articles are of no value even to the owner.”

There had been, it appeared, some hitch in the arrangement for his candidature; people at head-quarters wanted him either to put down a sum of money and contest a safe seat, or to put down no money and go in for a forlorn hope; neither of these offers was he prepared to accept. Followed a passage which astonished me—

“I never see anything of you, little man. I hear about you at times, and it seems you are getting along admirably, but this is no excuse for ignoring the existence of those who like myself are plodding slowly. As I hinted a while ago, we shall want your help presently and then, it is to be supposed, there will be opportunity of meeting, but meanwhile it is surely possible for us to have a talk somewhere. I feel your behaviour towards me more acutely than you perhaps imagine.”

There could be no doubt about the fact that Len was pained; it seemed useless to try to persuade myself that the responsibility was mine. A telegram went at once urging him to come to my rooms, or to allow me to go to his; no



answer came. A few days later, unable to endure the thought that he might be still nursing a grievance, I wired again, paying for a reply; in return arrived the words, "Will arrange shortly." Ernest Fowler paid a visit to Tavistock Place one evening, partly to see me, mainly to enable him to prepare a series of short sketches called "My Landlady," and when he had recovered from disappointment—

"Made certain she would be a character," he remarked.

—We discussed my trouble, and Ernest offered to organise an evening in Beaufort Buildings off the Strand, ask some writing friends, and a barrister or two, invite Len, and instruct everybody to bend all their efforts in the direction of making a fuss over him. Ernest had been compelled to become a member of the Club, because a friendly editor told him St. Donatt's Road, S.E., did not present an encouraging endorsement on the face of manuscript, was likely, indeed, to prejudice any fair-minded man against the pages which followed.

"I'll do it for your sake," Ernest pointed out. "For myself I can manage without your brother, daresay he can rub along without me. I was introduced to him by someone the other day, and asked him whether he happened to know New Cross. Just to see what he said."

"What did he say?"

"Replied that he knew it by name."

"Well," I retorted, heatedly, "you have nothing to complain of. It's extraordinary to me, this dislike that seems to be exhibited towards my brother. One of those unreasoning animosities, like hatred of the Jews, that cannot be argued against."

Then we won't argue about it," he said, good-temperedly.

We'll just let it be where it is. You find a date that suits him, and I'll see to the rest."

Ernest's evening was a triumph for everybody, and a complete joy to me; there ensued, it appeared, a certain restiveness because the affair was widely paraphrased the following day as "Complimentary Banquet to a Public

Man," but this was not the fault of Ernest, not my fault, and it seemed useless to expect in this world to succeed in pleasing everybody. We had a table for about ten people in the dining-room, and other members politely ate apart; in the front room my brother soon managed to get them all around him, selecting, with wonderful cleverness, the most alert and useful, bearing himself in a manner that made him equal to the best. It would have pleased me to get the opportunity of a talk with him; there were a thousand and one things we could have chatted about; I wanted to speak to him about myself, to hear about him. But it was good to sit and watch, to observe that his hair was showing prematurely a touch of grey at the sides, to see the note of daring in his collar, to take mental record of every gesture, to try to remember his anecdotes, to remark on his perfect and absolute confidence, to say approvingly, "Your bird, Len!" when he made a good shot. I wished once or twice he would draw me into the discussion, but it was clear the task of making new friends engaged all his efforts. He rose at the exactly right hour, when they wanted him to stay a little longer, and made appropriate and tactful good-byes.

"You're coming with me, little man," he said.

As we walked along the Strand, I hoped earnestly we might meet some business acquaintance, but the combination of incidents was too admirable to come true. He wore his fur-lined overcoat that stopped short of the extravagance of an agent in advance, and yet induced folk to look at him a second time; as we crossed Trafalgar Square and went by one of the lions, two men said in interested tones, after they had passed, "That's Drew. The tall chap is Drew!" Len desired information about his old rooms, about the landlady.

"Does she ever talk to you about me?"

"She's a reserved woman, Len."

"Didn't know," he remarked, "whether under your cross-examination——"

"Len!"

"Oh," he said, lightly, "you're as curious as the rest of the world about my doings. I am acquainted with no subject which has such a fascination for people as that of my private life."

"It has nothing to do with anybody but yourself."

"Precisely my argument. There's a great deal too much of this puritanical interference, and I'm determined not to tolerate it for a single moment. Anyone who tries that game on with me will wish he had never been gifted with the power of speech. I've crushed people in my time," he went on, vehemently, "and, as sure as we are walking here in Pall Mall, I'll do it again if the necessity arises."

"I never hear anything much said against you."

"You wouldn't," he remarked, looking down at me. "If anything of the kind were said in your presence, I feel sure you wouldn't hear it. You believe in me?" he asked, eagerly.

"Of course I believe in you!"

"Do you believe in anyone else to the same extent?" I mentioned, rather shyly, one name. "Oh, don't be so foolish as to put your trust in women," he cried. "I've found them out long ago. I've found everything out. Now I suppose—don't answer this unless you want to—I suppose you still say your prayers at night? Extraordinary!" he declared, when the admission had been given. "Why you're probably the only sane grown-up person in London who does it."

"There are plenty," I protested. "Even Kitty Latham told me once she prayed for you every night and morning."

"That reminds me," he said. "Methinks the lady doth protest too much. I shall have to go down there and explain matters fully."

"If you don't hurry," I said, chaffingly, "I shall be married before you are."

"This is where I live at present," he remarked, taking out his latch key. "They are only doll's rooms, and they are expensive, but the position is good." From the letter-box he took a large number of communications, and started to walk upstairs. "Shut the door as you go," he called over his shoulders. "You're letting in a deuce of a draught."



## CHAPTER XV

### LEN IN A STRUGGLE

I MADE a practice of dividing my Sunday afternoons between my mother and the Fowlers, giving rather more than half to mother because I always saw Milly on an evening during the week; sometimes more frequently, as when orders came to the office for some concert that promised not to be financially successful, on which occasions I waited near the refreshment-rooms on the left hand side of Charing Cross Station—under the clock being reckoned too conspicuous—and, the North Kent train coming in, endured torments because she was not the first to come in sight through the barrier; when an emerald green opera cloak with a pretty face and a cream lace shawl atop arrived, I had to remind myself very sternly that the rules of good behaviour prohibited embracing in public. We exercised what in comparison with former times might be called reckless prodigality, for the least sign of rain or a trace of mud was held to justify disbursement of one and six for a hansom.

It was on a Sunday night that mother reminded me I had not called lately to see Mr Latham; she had met the doctor in Lewisham High Road, and he, after giving many details about his wife's cousin, mentioned that no alteration could be reported; Viney said the old chap would never move or speak again in this world, and the sooner he went to the next the better for all parties concerned, especially for the girl. Kitty was making herself ill over the long task of attending to him; she refused, it appeared, either to give this up or to allow Viney to write a prescription for her.

"Directly you've finished your tea, Henry, my dear," said mother, "and you need'nt spare the toast and the mustard and cress, for there's plenty more where they came from, you just on with your hat and gloves, and I'll pop into the Fowlers and tell them you'll be half an hour late. Living as the Lathams do, right away there in Hatcham, they must feel sometimes as though they were outside of civilisation. So you just on with your hat and——" My mother had adopted the method of saying everything three times.

I held in my pocket contributions for the book; these were received delightedly. To save time and to ensure that we missed nothing, I now subscribed to a press-cutting agency with a request that all references concerning Len should be posted to me, and my mother never ceased to express amazement at the ingenuity of the scheme; her wonder at the means adopted. One of the new batch possessed a personal touch that diverted us, and I begged her to allow me to take it and show to Kitty; it said, "We hear that Mr Leonard Drew, whose industry in political affairs is untiring, will shortly leave the bachelor ranks. We offer, in advance, our sincere congratulations."

The spring afternoon had exhausted itself; but for the desire to appear at my best and smartest in the old neighbourhood, one might have been tempted to turn up the collar of the frock coat. The public house at the corner was not opened; lamplighters appeared to have experienced some delay; the monotonous jingle of the muffin man's bell came from a side street. I increased my pace, going by the long row of small houses in Hatcham Park Road, where pianofortes played hymns in a resolute manner, and found myself almost breathless on arriving at the Latham's house. Stopping to restore something like composure before entering, I noticed the gas was on in the office: through the gauze blinds two figures could be seen. One of these was certainly Mrs Latham, for her shrill voice reached the railings, but not so clearly as to

enable me to distinguish the words. Mrs Latham in a bad temper, evidently ; in a raging, tearing mood so far as could be guessed, and I determined that if she were exhibiting this to the hurt and perturbation of Kitty, mine would be the task to interfere tactfully.

"Did you knock before?" asked the maid. "'Pon my word, there's such a shindy going on that no one can hear anything else. We miss you, Mr Drew. I always used to call you the little peace-maker, and, providing you don't think it a liberty, there wasn't much 'arm in the remark. Go into the back room and wait there till they've finished the round."

"Who is with her, Emily?"

"Some one you know," replied the girl, listening eagerly. "Lord!" with undisguised satisfaction, "isn't she giving him what for!"

Mrs Latham continued the exhibition of considerable prowess of speech. Always a fluent woman, it was not easy to guess whether this was a quarrel concerning some trifle, or whether it had to do with an event of Imperial urgency. From overhead came the sound of slow movements.

"Who was that, Emily?" cried Mrs Latham, sharply, in the passage. "Who was it knocked at the door? Answer me this minute." The girl furnished the information. "Tell him to come into the office. He's arrived at the very nick of time, as it happens. No, you don't!" To the visitor within. "Haven't near done with you yet."

My brother sat, easily and undisturbedly, on the edge of the varnished table, his hat resting on one knee which he clasped with both hands. He nodded as I entered, and, by a movement, invited me to take the horse-hair sofa.

"What's the night like?" he asked.

"Never you mind," interrupted Mrs Latham, flaming with anger, "what the night's like. I'm going to tell you what you are like, and I'm going to tell everyone else, too!"

"This good lady," explained Len, turning to me, "is slightly upset."

"Slightly," she echoed, ironically.

"Slightly upset because I have, in the gentlest possible manner, requested her to convey a message. Apparently, she considers such a task below her dignity, and my apologies are of no avail whatever. Have a try, and see what you can do."

"I am sure, Mrs Latham, my brother had no intention \_\_\_\_\_"

"He's got intentions all right," she retorted, "and pretty bad ones they are, too. Ask him to tell you what it's all about. Go on; ask him."

"I came down here," he said, quietly, "in the hope of seeing Miss Kitty. It appears she wrote to me yesterday, and this excellent woman seems under the impression that I am responsible for work which is really within the control of the Postmaster General."

"I happen to know," she burst out, "that poor Kitty wrote to you to say she was coming up to see you this evening, and it's my belief you received the letter, and you dodged down here in order to escape seeing her."

"You can't prove that," I pointed out.

"Don't want to prove it. Plenty of things in this world that we can't prove are true. Bet you a shilling he's got the letter in his pocket this very minute."

"The woman," said Len, "is now going back to her earlier days when every discussion in the public bar ended in a wager."

"That's a wicked falsehood," she cried, infuriatedly. "No betting and no anything else that wasn't allowed by law ever went on whilst I was present. I had an eye everywhere." Len laughed. "And the inspector gave me his word of honour that mine was the best conducted place in the whole neighbourhood, and he wasn't a man to say anything he didn't mean."

"You will observe, Henry," said my brother, "that the



most incredible statements are accepted by this excellent person, whilst a simple assertion from me concerning a simple matter is rejected."

"Let's get back to the facts," ordered Mrs Latham. "Let's see exactly what we're talking about. That question of the letter is merely a side-issue. What you said twenty minutes ago——"

"Seems much longer."

"What you said twenty minutes ago was that you wanted me to mention to Kitty that you were going to be married. Married to some one else. Nice job to ask me to take on, isn't it?"

"Tell me!" I said, amusedly, to him. "Mrs Latham has got it all wrong, of course. Why, there's a notice in one of the papers——"

"The notice, oddly enough," he remarked, "is quite correct. Mrs Woodrow has been good enough to accept my invitation, and I thought it only fair and honourable and right to acquaint my friends with the circumstance. Came here first, hoping to receive congratulations; instead, I am overwhelmed by a perfect storm, an absolute tornado of reproaches. It astonishes me. It pains me. It hurts me very much."

"But surely," I said, uneasily, "you don't really mean it, Len."

"Why shouldn't I mean it?" A note in his tones that he had never before used in speaking to me; it was as though he boxed my ears. "Of course, I mean it. Nothing unusual in a man of my age, and my position, getting married, is there? I want a wife to help me in my social duties, and I want her to be a woman of refinement and education." Mrs Latham snapped out a suggestion. "Yes," he agreed, "and money. What do you suggest," turning sharply again to me, "by staring in this way?"

"Let me speak!" interposed Mrs Latham. "Who's that moving about; the girl I suppose. Henry, go and tell her not to listen at doors. Let me speak! This has nothing to

do with your brother, Mr Drew, and well you know it ; there's no reason why he should be called upon to do your dirty work. If it comes to a question of courage, supposing you let us see you stop on and face Kitty yourself."

He glanced at his watch, and ordered me to look out a train. A Sunday train ; not week-day.

"She's got a letter somewhere that will put you in a corner." He leaned forward interestedly without meeting her gaze. "That I know because I've seen it."

"A curious creature, this," he remarked to me. "Seems to have extraordinary eyesight." Mrs Latham waved aside the allusion.

"Seen it and it has a distinct promise, that I'll swear. Now, I've got money of my own, Mr Drew, and although you seem determined to keep up this lardy-dardy manner, I think you won't fail to grasp my meaning. I'm in a passion, but I know what I'm saying, and what I say I shall do. Every penny of that money shall be spent, if necessary, in order to show you up!"

"Job for you, Henry. You're in the advertising trade, aren't you?"

"Your letter or letters will be read in court," she announced, strenuously, "and if you think that's likely to do you any good with your Mrs Woodrow, or your politics——"

"Go and find the letter!"

"Shall do nothing of the kind."

"Go and find the letter!" he repeated, loudly. "Let me see exactly what was said in it."

"That letter," she replied, doggedly, "is Kitty's own property, and although I know where it is, because I read it to her father the other day, knowing it would please him, I'd no more dream of giving you a chance of putting it in the fire, than I would of trusting you in any other way."

"I'm going to see that letter before I go out of this house."

"Then you'll stay here a jolly long time."

"Which is Kitty's room?" he demanded sharply of me.  
"Come upstairs and show me."

"I think, Len, she sleeps now in the room where her father is. You mustn't go in there."

"Mustn't!" he echoed, explosively. "People are not allowed to say 'mustn't' to me!"

We were at the door when I saw, through the upper glass partition, Mr Latham. The large, heavy white face of Mr Latham, damp with the amazing task of coming down the stairs without assistance, the card board cap a-top: his breath worked noisily. I opened the door and led him into the room towards the settee, but he stopped before reaching this, and gripping the mantel-piece, refused to go further.

"Now then!" in a gurgling voice. He pulled at his old-fashioned dressing-gown, and stood there facing Len with something of dignity in his manner, despite his eccentric appearance.

"Glad to find you better," remarked Len, advancing.  
"This is where a good constitution serves. By taking care of oneself during healthy years, one is so much better prepared——"

"Go out!" said Mr Latham to us. "You two go out. Leave me. And him!"

He shuffled across the office with the assistance of the table, his dressing-gown catching at the waste-paper basket which I saved from falling; he said, "His Nibs!" in tones of approval, and when we were outside nodded before locking the door. The servant scuttled off to her own quarters; Mrs Latham, suffering from reaction after the excitement, leaned a forehead on the bannisters and whimpered. By standing on tip-toe I could see through the glass half of the door; the single gas jet, that hissed a continuous protest against being turned on extravagantly, gave illumination. My brother was talking again in his suave tones, polishing his silk hat with the right arm sleeve and contemplating the result as though this were the subject that really engaged his interest; Mr Latham had returned to the mantel-piece where he stood

now with his large hands inside the frayed cord of his dressing-gown.

"They're going to discuss the matter quietly," I said to Mrs Latham, persuading her to sit on the third step of the staircase, and patting her wrist comfortingly.

"Poor Kitty," she moaned. "Poor Kitty!"

"Depend upon it, there's a way out. Len isn't the man to make trouble; he's the one to clear it up!"

"Treated just the same," she went on, "when I was about Kitty's age. I got over it. It never made no difference to me. But Kitty's different. I had half a dozen strings to my bow; she's only got one."

"Let's take the worst view of it," I argued. "Well, then, we must all be as good as we can to Kitty, and help her to forget."

"Somehow," she said, still with handkerchief at eyes, "you're as different from that man in there as chalk from cheese."

"I'm sorry!"

"You needn't be. He may go on and prosper, but don't you ever fancy for a single moment you'd like to be in his place. He has some pretty middling black hours, I promise you, when he happens to be alone. I've been watching men nearly all my life, and so far as a woman can understand them, I do understand them."

"I know him better than you do, Mrs Latham."

"You know him too well to be able to see what he's really like. It's the same when anyone falls in love. With my first husband, people used to come and bring me tittle-tattle about him with, 'Have you heard so and so's the case?' or 'I think you ought to know so and so,' but all they said didn't make the slightest difference to me. Not at the time. Later on, of course, it was different. Is that Kitty?"

I went to the front door and opened it, but no one stood there. Returning, I raised myself again and looked through into the office; the explanation of the sound of shuffling movement became apparent.



"Still quiet?" she asked. "They ought to have finished talking by this time; it must be bad for Latham. Let me know if anything happens. Dear, dear, I shall have to pay for this with a headache in the morning. And to-morrow's washing day!"

Inside the office, old Latham gripped Len by the elbows, and in talking (the lips shaping words with difficulty) now and again shook him. The silk hat had gone into a corner where it lodged absurdly; Len's walking-stick, in two pieces, was inside the fender. A sudden push that sent my brother against the corner of the table made me knock sharply against the window; they took no notice. The low, almost silent quarrel continued.

"Is there another key to this door, Mrs Latham?"

"Leave them to argue it out," she answered, rocking to and fro. "If Latham can talk at all, he can talk a lot."

Len, tiring, apparently, of the intermittent shaking, made a strong effort to disengage himself, but the other man's hold was too good. Len seemed to be looking around for something, and his hand went towards the ruler; he managed to grasp this, and with a quick movement brought it well against the side of Mr Latham's left wrist; the next moment the old man found himself hurled against the horse-hair settee, and Len was at him with the ruler. I kicked violently at the door, struck at it, shouted. Mrs Latham, coming from the staircase, assumed that my action must be mistaken because it was my action, and tugged foolishly at me. Disengaging myself from her, I ran into the back room and found a chair; returning with this I smashed in the top half of the door, and using the chair now to stand upon, managed somehow to squeeze through the space made in the smashed glass, and to drop clumsily inside.

I found myself struggling desperately with my own brother Len. I found myself twisting his collar and forcing him to desist. I found myself with both fists against his chin, compelling him to come away from Mr Latham and to enable

me to stand between them. Outside, Mrs Latham implored the maid to fetch the police; the servant replied that this clashed with precise instructions already issued to her regarding conversation with members of the force; the girl had evidently made up her mind to lose nothing of a scene that probably made an exciting break in a monotonous life.

"Kitty's father too!" I panted to Len, reprovingly.

"I'm going!" he retorted. "I've seen enough of this confounded place and of all of you. Where's my hat?"

"Hope you're not much hurt, Mr Latham?"

"Life in the old dog," he groaned, "yet. And I ain't done with him, neither. I'll get better just in order to do for him. I won't go until I've outed him."

"You don't mean that——"

"His Nibs don't understand," remarked Mr Latham, to the rosette in the ceiling. "It ain't in his line."

"Does this mean," asked Len, nervously, "that this old fool is going—going to follow me about wherever I go and persecute me, just because I have called here to put an end to a misunderstanding. The letter I received last night gave me no idea——"

"You did get her note then, Len."

"Be quiet!" he commanded. "Mind your own business."

"Shan't shoot him," continued old Latham, "because I don't hold with foreign tricks. Shan't knife him because that I consider Italian. But you just tell him that years ago South London knew what Jimmie Latham of Hatcham could do with his fists, and I'm going to have one more knock-out contest before I give up. Make that as clear as you can to him!"

My brother pulled himself together, and gazed at me. Gazed steadily at me in a way that reminded one of the hypnotist at New Cross Hall.

"Little man," in a low commanding tone, "get me out of this. For Heaven's sake, help me! You assisted me before, do it again. Think of Blackheath. Blackheath!"

Ah," he shook his head as I hesitated. "Might have known you'd refuse."

I rubbed at my head in the effort of thought. Suddenly threw away everything, as once before on board the river steamer. Went and unlocked the door.

"Mrs Latham," I cried, "run up and find that letter you were speaking about."

"For you to give over to him?"

"It shall not go out of my possession."

She obeyed and came back with an envelope addressed to Kitty with a receiving post-mark of S.E., the other circle was not distinct. Len put out his hand quickly, and appeared astonished as I drew back.

"Mr Latham," I said, speaking slowly and reading the first page, "you have been ill for sometime and you haven't quite understood all that was going on. You think this unsigned letter was written by Len."

"We know it," interrupted Mrs Latham. "Why should Kitty have been so anxious to see him if anybody else had written it? Besides, Henry, what did you hint at yourself just now?"

I sat at the table, and drawing the blotting-pad to the edge, took a sheet of paper from the memorandum case. The original letter I gave to Mrs Latham, and from memory, wrote out in what was not my usual handwriting, the early part of the communication.

"Now," with something, perhaps, of determination, "would you mind comparing the two?"

Mrs Latham gasped, and took both across to her husband; he gave a gesture and said his eyesight was not what it ought to be. Len came and stood beside me, again polishing his silk hat.

"You mean to say, Henry, that you wrote this letter?"

"It hasn't been quite fair to you, Mrs Latham, and I'm rather ashamed of myself. It's been an underhand sort of game. But I see now where I've been wrong, and I am going to meet her to-night and have a good talk privately with her,

and if she is willing to marry me, why of course I am willing and—and anxious to marry her.”

Len, as we stood there in the silence that followed, went from the room, and we heard him pull the front door to after him. The old man tried to wipe his bruised face; he would not allow me to help.

“Never thought,” he said, as his wife assisted him out of the office, “never imagined that His Nibs was a chap of that sort. Missis, I feel rather inclined for a little carriage exercise.”

“That’s good news,” she remarked, heartily. “Where would you like to be drove to, Latham?”

“Lewisham Cemetery,” he replied, with a chuckle.



## CHAPTER XVI

### LEN IN CHURCH AND OUT

TO my mind, the south of metropolis—with its occasional heights permitting one to turn a back upon London, its thick forest of chimney-pots, its stout gasometers, the shipping in the Surrey Commercial Docks, the reflected flare, of an evening in the sky from lights in main thoroughfares, and gaze away to the beautiful counties of Kent and Surrey—cannot be beaten, is certainly hard to equal. It may be admitted that there rests one small space of South London where I would not willingly go ; I mean along by the blank wall side of Amersham Vale, near the railway-station at New Cross. It was here, on the Sunday night, that I walked with Kitty Latham, arguing, pleading, almost threatening, doing all this in a quiet voice because folk were constantly arriving by train, or rushing up to catch one. I suppose there exists scarcely any road in London that has not known tragedy. Amersham Vale is certainly acquainted with one.

Old Latham, a fortnight later, took the journey to which he had referred, and my Aunt Mabel thanked me warmly for using influence on her behalf, offering to pay for a pair of black gloves as tangible expression of her indebtedness, and expressing gratification in finding there still remained some who recognised the ties of relationship. Her son-in-law had recently lost his mother, and you would have thought that in the circumstances—"But no!" said Aunt Mabel, with a shiver of annoyance. "Oh dear me, no! Must needs go off to a firm in the West End, and I only hope they made him pay through the nose for it. That's all the harm I wish him!" I did not go back to the house with Mrs Latham

and Kitty and Mrs Latham's relatives, partly because urgent business called me to Queen Street, partly because I had no great desire to be seen in New Cross. Kitty told me she preferred to delay the reply to my offer, although I felt anxious to see the matter settled one way or the other ; meanwhile it had been necessary to write to Milly and appeal to her, without giving any reason, to break off our engagement. Kitty I tried to encourage from silence as the carriage allowed me to take a train at a convenient station, by the whispered reminder that we were acting in the interest of Len, an interest surely more precious to us than anything else in the world.

"Don't know yet what I'm going to do," she said, absently, as she took my hand. "Seems queer to think that I can't call you my little brother-in-law any longer."

"You will be able to call me something else."

"You're such a boy," she remarked, gazing at me as I stood with my hat off outside the black carriage, "that I don't believe you half understand what you are doing."

"Doing exactly what I think I ought to do."

Mrs Latham was well-disposed towards me, in spite of what must have appeared erratic behaviour, for a note came from her later, written in an old-fashioned running hand, and lines crossed at the end as though postage were still an expensive item, informing me the solicitors had cleared up everything at last ; that all, she was thankful to say, had been left to Kitty ; trusted I should be kind to the girl, who certainly appeared to her more reconciled and happy now than she had been for some time. The money had come to a larger sum than anybody hoped ; everyone was gratified at this, with the exception of Kitty herself.

"Be sure to write to her," the letter went on, "often as you can. She wanted yesterday to call on the young lady you had also been carrying on with, because she felt it must be hard upon her ; I induced her to put off the visit until she was better. She said it all seemed such a tangle, but I told her I had known worse knots than this to straighten out when one gave them time."

By the same post, arrived a formal communication from the honorary secretary of the club in Beaufort Buildings, acquainting me with the fact that my proposer had withdrawn his name from the support of my candidature; because of this the nomination would not be submitted to members of the Committee. I sent this on to Len, without remark, in the hope he would help me to join one of his clubs, but no reply came. Mr Stemson mentioned in my hearing that he admired anyone who was a demon for work, but a limit should be fixed and adhered to, for the good reason that if you went beyond, trouble and illness, and brain-fag, and goodness knew what ensued; reckoning it up at the end on both sides of the ledger, you probably found you had lost over the transaction. All the same, continued Mr Stemson pointedly, there would be no great harm in certain of the staff emulating the example set, and if some of the canvassers put more energy into the work, the result would be better for themselves, good for the firm. Queen Street certainly, at this period, saved me.

A gilt-edged invitation note came from a Mrs Battell, and was about to be thrown aside, when a name lower down arrested attention. The marriage was between her niece Mary Woodrow and Mr Leonard Drew; the words—

“Reception afterwards at 126 Cadogan Gardens, three to five o’clock.”

—had been crossed out with a single line. Calling for the envelope which had been sliced open with others by a junior, I found it was in my brother’s handwriting. I wrote at once to ask my mother whether she had received a similar invitation, and to arrange about a present; her answer came to the effect that she expected me to take her to the church, wherever it was, for without my assistance she would be certain to lose herself; the two ladies were now hard at work in the endeavour to select from the current number of a journal some appropriate costume on

which the dressmaker in Florence Road could set to work.

"Dear Henry," the letter went on, "your conduct has worried me, and I cannot understand what you are at. Milly Fowler has gone to Devonshire to stay with some relations. She did not come to see me before she started. Dear Henry, I do hope you are not getting too high and mighty. I must now conclude with fond love.

"P.S. Len too is not behaving as I thought he would behave, but I expect he knows best."

It was obvious my mother's first words at Charing Cross (where I found myself wishing very much that the figure of Milly could trip round the corner of the barrier) would be—

"Happy's the bride the sun shines on!"

—And the remark duly came. The good soul was too much excited over the coming event to discuss anything else, and as a hansom took us through the Mall, expressed anxiety concerning the exact shade that a lady, entering upon marriage for the second time, would wear; comforted herself with the thought that experience might enable Mrs Woodrow to make the answers in a clear, distinct voice, and at the correct moment. Near Victoria, news on the placards caught her attention, and she remarked on the considerable advantages enjoyed by those who had no money to invest beyond the sum which the post-office authorities were willing to guard. The rest of the journey was taken up by her consideration of the nice point whether I ought to give the cabman one and six or one and nine, and when, being pressed, I told her I intended to pay two shillings, she remarked, dolefully, that some people appeared to enjoy playing ducks and drakes with their money; she only hoped it did not mean I should come to want. The alteration in recent procedure had compelled her to re-arrange her mental picture of the house at Blackheath.

"Did she have any children by the first marriage, Henry, my dear?" The answer caused her to give a regretful sigh.



A crowd stood outside the church ; several carriages had arrived and were being marshalled by the police. We shewed our notes of invitation to gain entrance, and once inside, my mother, by energy and persistence, routed a verger and took me to seats well in front. There she stood up, explaining that she had given her word to take back to the two lady lodgers a full description of all the dresses, relinquishing this task for a moment when I complimented her upon her own. Then I did not consider it too youthful ? Not a year, not a month, not a day. That was all right then ; she had, to tell the truth, experienced some doubts, but now she need not bother any further.

My brother came up the aisle with his best man ; a lady journalist sitting near to us whispered loudly that this was a well-known member of Parliament. Len, quite composed, chatted with friends, whilst his companion twisted gloves nervously and glanced at a watch.

"Why, there's Kitty," said my mother, excitedly. "Down there, just at the very beginning of one of the rows. Fancy her coming here !"

I thought this not in perfect taste on the part of Kitty, and I was about to step along and beg of her not to make a scene, when Mrs Woodrow arrived, and I could only send down a warning, appealing glance. At the first words—

"Dearly belovéd, we are gathered together here in the sight of God."

—the church hushed. My mother began to weep.

"Well," said the lady journalist, at the end, in a business-like way, "it's gone off all right. Now I've got to hurry along to half a dozen things, and how in the world I'm going to do them all, and get back to the office by nine, I really do not know !"

Len and his wife came down the aisle ; we stood up in the hope that he would recognise us. They were going past when she glanced around and smiled, stopping him at the same time.

"The election," she reminded me.

"Did help my brother there," I admitted.

"Your brother? Oh, then you're coming on to Cadogan Gardens?"

"I think not!"

"Henry is a busy man," remarked Len.

"Absurd!" she declared, emphatically. "Of course you will come and you will bring—your mother? Come now, and take one of the carriages."

I followed them closely to see what Kitty would do. She had been reading a good deal during her father's illness; it was reasonable to fear she might want to enact a scene taken from some romance. Instead, she put out her hand very pleasantly to Len, said—

"Best congratulations!"

—and with a bright nod to us, made her way out to the opposite end of the row. I wanted to wait for her outside, but an important, managing person obeyed instructions by hurrying us into an open carriage, delaying it for a moment whilst he found two more people to sit opposite. These were young men, each furnished with a giggling laugh, who, as the carriage went, talked in a high voice and vaguely. Wonderful person, said one; no wonder she had married twice; many in the same circumstances would have postponed the wedding, what? But perhaps, said the other, she was not yet aware of the news; it had only been about during the last half-hour, what? In that case, remarked the first, seemed undeniably rough on Thing-me-bob. At any rate, interesting presently to see how Thing-me-bob accepted the information; worth while to put in a good twenty minutes that they might be in a position to report fully to those not privileged to be present; as good as "Charley's Aunt." The other remarked with a great air of wisdom, "True, true! But mind you, dear old man, entirely different idea, what?" My mother sat upright, taking no notice of this vivacious conversation, and I had not the assurance to lean forward and ask what they were talking about. "Awful rummy things happen in

this world," remarked one; the second, after thought, was unable to contradict the assertion completely but suggested, with deference, that the happenings were not rummier than one might expect them to be, taking everything into consideration.

We were shown into a room on the second floor to view the presents, and made way through the crowd, endeavouring to find the silver frame containing our photographs, which we had chosen as something not likely to be duplicated; my mother was the first to discover it on a table in the corner with a number of other articles; a tall frowning man on guard, who would have been identified even by a blind man as a plain clothes detective. He edged towards us as we examined the frame, and I mentioned to him that the photographs which it should have contained were missing, the card with our names could not be seen; he answered confidentially that if nothing of greater value disappeared his duties would be held to have been satisfactorily performed. The folk shouldered towards a long screen on which telegrams were fixed with drawing-pins; exclamations of surprise came from those who encountered one at the centre.

"That means somebody important has telegraphed," said my mother. "If you could only press through, Henry, and get the name, it would be something more to carry in my mind."

I made the attempt, but found myself compelled to retreat. To speak the plain and exact truth, these people had the worst manners of any set I had hitherto encountered; the pit crowd outside the Strand Theatre on the slope from the street to the Embankment on a Saturday night, which Milly and I often joined, was in comparison, a precise and decorous assemblage, for here everyone talked in the loudest tones, and obstructed without giving a word of apology. Thought of visits to the play, forced me to consider the jumble of recent events; one could not help agreeing with the view of the philosopher in the open carriage.

We made our way down to the drawing-room, and presently managed to near the married couple.

"So glad you were able to come on," said my brother, pleasantly. "The affair would not have seemed quite legal and proper without you, Henry."

"The 2.20 from Charing Cross," he continued, answering my question. "That will get us to Paris in fairly good time to-night, and then we go on in the morning by the express. You haven't done the South of France yet? My wife—"

He laughed, and I too laughed.

"My wife has a villa there. You and Kitty must come out and stay for a month or so, later on. Tell her how gratified I was to see her at church, won't you. Thought she looked very attractive. Good to find oneself," he glanced at his watch and suppressed a yawn, "to find oneself surrounded, at such a time, by old friends. When I come back, you and I must see more of each other. My name is near the top of the list for any chance bye-election."

"You're still keen on public work, Len."

"Little man," he said, lowering his voice, "I want the initials after my name. That's all! They'd be of tremendous assistance to me in business."

"But there will be plenty of money about now."

"I don't want to be indebted to my wife," he said, definitely, "for a single shilling."

"Candidly," remarked my mother to the bride, "of the two, I'd rather see it the other way about. Because there's no use in shutting one's eyes to figures, and by the time he's just over forty, you'll be getting on for sixty, and when a woman or even a lady gets to that age—of course your life hasn't been so hard as mine, but you see what I mean, don't you?"

"A beautiful collection of presents," I mentioned, interposing between them, and leaving Len to speak to some insurgent ladies. "Never seen so much valuable property brought together before."



"We were pleased to have yours."

"By-the-bye," said my mother, "I hope it hasn't been stolen or nothing. We had it taken, me and Henry, at the corner of Breakspear Road, and no one's any right to make off with it."

Mrs Len, declaring herself greatly concerned, insisted that we should all go upstairs and make inquiries. There the crowd had lessened, and whilst she started investigations, I went along to the screen and inspected the telegrams. "A thousand good wishes," said some. "May this auspicious day—" began others. And "Good luck and prosperity." Mrs Len, having ascertained from one of the maids that the photographs and the card had been put away by express orders from Mr Drew—

"Rather early," she remarked, with good temper, "for him to exercise control over my property."

—Brought my mother across, and unclipping pincenez, explained that she had to leave the task of opening and displaying telegrams to her lady companion, a mature woman who, it appeared, greatly resented Mrs Len's enterprise in marrying again.

"A business communication," I said, with a wave of my glove, "seems to have it's way here."

She read, and dropped the glasses swiftly.

"This is rather—" she said. Looked around in a dazed way, searching for the word. "Rather disturbing," she went on. "I'm afraid it means that nearly all my money is gone. Wonder how he will take the news."

"I can tell you," eagerly. "Oddly enough, my brother made a remark to me just now that answers the question." I quoted Len. My mother asked to be informed of the circumstances, and volunteered an incident within her own knowledge, wherein she had by error given half a sovereign to a tram conductor under the impression it was sixpence; discovering the error, waited for the return of the car from Waterloo and obtained, without any additional trouble, a refund of the nine and six.

"Go down," said Mrs Len to me, "and if there are not many people there, tell him to ask my aunt to take my place and request him to come here at once!"

Len declared this must be one of my blunders; I had certainly misunderstood the command; he went on talking to the women around him. I interrupted again after a few minutes, assuring him the matter was one of considerable urgency, but he once more put me aside. An old lady came forward and said in a strident voice—

"A dreadful business, Mr Drew, this bank failure!"

"Haven't heard of it, Lady Mac."

"Is it true," with open satisfaction, "that I am the first to bring you the news? What an enormous piece of good luck!" she whispered.

We went up the staircase, two steps at a time. In the room where the presents had been shown, the plain clothes man had brought a chair for Mrs Len.

"What does this mean?" demanded Len, brusquely. I led him towards the telegram on the screen.

"I think," she said, "that we had better give up the trip abroad. We might run down to Eastbourne instead for two or three days."

"You know all about Cockney holidays," he cried, swinging around to me. "Didn't you once go for an afternoon to Rosherville? Tell this invaluable lady who has just become my wife how we can get there. Or are you perhaps aware of a cheaper excursion? Capital item for the enterprising journals—'The happy pair left amid a shower of rice to spend their honeymoon in the Isle of Dogs.'"

He took up the nearest article from the nearest table, and flung it on the parqueted floor. It happened to be our frame.

"Not her fault," I protested.

"So clever of you to notice that," he said. "Of course it isn't her fault. I am the only person to blame. No one else is in the least degree responsible. I owe her a profound

apology for having led her into the misapprehension that I was about to marry a rich wife."

"But you didn't marry her only because you thought she had money, Len," pleaded my mother. "It was love that made you do it."

"A marvellous set," he declared, picking up the pieces of the frame. "A family possessing such a really wonderful insight into the human mind ought to be giving performances at the Egyptian Hall. Of course, it was love, my dear mother. You have only to give one glance at the lady, to feel certain of that. It was for the sake of her beautiful eyes; the eyebrows I think owe something to the cleverness of her maid. It was for the sake of her delightful hair; so many varying shades are rarely seen in the possession of one woman. It was for the sake of her splendid complexion; the resources of art——"

"Len," I shouted, "I like you, I love you, but I'm going to put a stop to all this."

"Don't you think you had better look after your own affairs? Strikes me you'll find your Kitty rather a difficult riddle to understand."

"If you're so eager on money," broke out my mother, "it was a pity you ever gave her up. Her father left over eight thousand pounds."

He went across to the large windows and gazed out. Downstairs the string band, that had been playing modestly, stopped, and those of us who had not observed its existence before, noticed it now. I bent near to Mrs Len and counselled her to make no change in the travelling arrangements; suggested that to get right away would be the best method of forgetting financial troubles; begged her to command me if I could be of any use in obtaining information. Len turned from the window and rejoined us.

"Now," he said, in his customary genial way, "having cleared the air, what shall we decide to do? Mary," to his wife, "you settle it?"

She expressed the opinion I had offered, and he went across and kneeling, kissed her forehead.

"That's right then," he said. "We'll let them see that we can take a slash across the face and not whimper. We'll forget all that we said to each other just now."

"Your wife never said a word, Len," pointed out my mother.

"Run and change," he ordered. "I'll tell them to see to the luggage and we shall be in Paris by midnight, after all. Henry and mother can go on and see us off at Charing Cross."

The inspector at the station, noting some traces of rice in the brim of my silk hat, came up on the platform and expressed regret that he could not, owing to pressure of traffic, give me and the lady a reserved compartment; Len, highly diverted by this, protested humorously against the common impression that he was always going to allow himself to be cut out by me; aside, he hinted, to my astonishment, that I knew what I was about in taking Kitty away from him. Other friends arrived, and we had to back out to the centre of the platform where my mother stood upon a wooden seat, alternately waving a handkerchief and, with it, wiping her eyes.

"Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye!"

Farewells were exchanged as the train moved; I just managed by standing on tiptoe to catch a sight of Mrs Len, and she smiled at me in a rather forlorn way. Len kept his head out of the window until the express disappeared, on the bridge, from sight.

"Len is peculiar," summed up my mother, when she had finally resolved to put her handkerchief away, "but, mind you, there's a lot of good of him."

I agreed emphatically.

"Next thing will be to see about you and Kitty. Your's won't be such a grand affair, Henry, but there's no reason why you two shouldn't be equally happy, providing you like to try."



"Is it too early to have a cup of tea, mother?"

"Never too early," she replied, "and never too late, so far as I'm concerned. Wonder how poor Milly's getting on down in Devonshire? Funny I should think of her just now!"

Len and his wife had their photographs taken in Paris, and the inscription on the one he sent me for my birthday, overpaid me for everything I had done.

## CHAPTER XVII

### LEN INDUCES ME TO TAKE STEPS

IF challenged, it is possible I could set down the purport of every remark that Len, at any time, made to me ; in many cases the exact words would be recorded. In view of this, it will be understood that his confidential comment on the platform came back on following days to my mind ; repetition induced me to begin to consider myself in the light of a fortune hunter of the most remorseless description, and this feeling would clutch at me when I was working at Queen Street (where I now had a small room of my own with my name on the door, and very thankful I felt at these moments for comparative seclusion) sometimes when walking home through Holborn and Southampton Row, sometimes when I read, or tried to invent a new scheme, or sat at my drawing board ; sometimes the alarming thought came in the early hours of morning, causing my eyes to open widely, and all possibility of further sleep to vanish.

"Get more rest," said Stenson once more. "Try the eight hours plan. Always glad to have wrinkles from you, but you needn't begin to wear them on your forehead."

Information conveyed to me by Mrs Len's solicitors was to the effect that only a few sweepings would be saved from the collapse of the bank, and comparison was one of the motives which induced me to write to Kitty. I tried to make it a proper and a tactful letter, but the task was not easy ; perhaps one had become too much used to the method of dictating correspondence. I reminded her of our long conversation in Amersham Vale on the Sunday night when I persuaded her to act with me in the interests of my brother ; she would recollect that at the time there existed no impression she was

likely to become well off; she must understand me when I said it seemed right and fair that, in the new circumstances, she should have choice of reconsidering the decision which I had then persuaded her to give. Kitty was not to reply at once, but to take her own time for consideration, and I would run down to Hatcham any evening she liked to suggest.

Following the despatch of this, a desperate inclination to see Milly and ascertain all she had to say, possessed me. The thought that she might prove indifferent was hard enough to endure; the possibility that she suffered as I suffered was intolerable. My mother procured the Devonshire address, and on a Saturday I left Waterloo by the 6.10 morning train, travelling first-class that there might be space and convenience for thoughts. The intention had been to rehearse on the seven hours' journey, and to arrive at the exact note to be used at the meeting with her, conveying my own distress and a proper division of sympathy, but into the compartment at the last minute jumped my old chief, Prentice, who flung himself into a corner, groaned with the disturbance that a stout asthmatic man feels after hurrying, and presently with the *Times* made a screen which indicated he had no desire for conversation. Before the train reached Surbiton, he had put this down and was talking, without recognising me, of the indifference displayed by Nature to a man's own mental disturbance; borrowing a pencil he made a note of this on the margin of his newspaper.

"Do you mean," he said, when I had introduced myself, "to look me in the face and tell me that you're little Henry who used to be in Great Tower Street? Impossible! I'll not believe it."

Assurance given.

"You haven't grown much," conceded G. W. P., "but you've changed so enormously. And you're really my friend Henry? I wrote a bit of poetry once called 'Friendship'; not the conventional thing in the least."

I felt sure of that.

“‘Oh, friendship’s surely but a name, A kind of charm that makes one sleep.’ Rather neat, wasn’t it? I’ll send a copy on to you, and get you to read it and give me your candid opinion.”

I expressed a hope, in the interests of the reading public, that he was writing a good deal. G. W. P. shook his head.

“A matter has been occupying my thoughts,” he said, gazing at the foot-warmer, “to the absolute exclusion of everything else. Worst of it is, I can’t talk to anyone about it.” He gave a shiver. “What’s going to be the end of this business in South Africa? Kruger seems to me a difficult nut to crack.”

My views were given fully, but they did not appear to gain the whole of his attention, and even when some extraordinary opinion was offered in the hope of inducing him to contradict, he only signified casual assent. Presently he interrupted and asked whether I cared to hear the domestic worries of a man in the wine trade, and receiving the answer that I myself was rather crowded with trouble, entered upon the recital with animation. You had to picture to yourself, begged G. W. P., the case of two young people, far away in the early eighties, who somehow married, took rooms in Notting Hill, and began to quarrel with scarcely a moment’s delay. Which of the two started this, appeared to be still an arguable question; point was that it went on for years until the situation became impossible, and the parties found themselves for once in perfect agreement over the suggestion that they could not agree. Mrs Prentice now lived in North Devon on an ample allowance, and about every six weeks her husband was called upon to make this long journey to Barnstaple and back.

“Good of you to take so much trouble.”

G. W. P. requested me, with earnestness, to believe that it was undertaken from no desire on his side. Always, it appeared, the same course of events took place. Always,



Mrs Prentice received him at the station with enthusiasm, with apologies for giving him the trouble of coming from London, fair prophecies concerning the joint happiness of the future. Always before arriving at the house some remark sent her into display of violent temper; the door was banged in his face, and he had to lunch at the Imperial; this had now become such a matter of course that he generally sent a wire to the hotel beforehand. That was the case; what did I think about it all? I said, with an air of wisdom, that women folk were not always easy to manage; the great thing was to wait for the right moment, and then proceed adroitly in conversation. No doubt Mr Prentice, finding his wife in pleasant mood, made some statement that overstepped the bounds of wise reticence.

"I don't!" he cried, testily. "I assure you, as man to man, that the most ordinary reference, say, to a slight cold, or an allusion to poor old Gladstone, will suddenly make her break out, and when that happens I defy an angel from Heaven to manage her. All very well for you to talk, but you've had no experience in these matters. Once a woman makes up her mind to argue, no one can do anything with her. It will do you a lot of good," he continued, resentfully, "to get hold of a nagging wife, because she'll make you understand what some men have to put up with. I tell you, if I hadn't my verses to fall back on, I should simply worry myself to death and feel jolly glad when it all came to an end. And so would you, if you were in my place."

I argued less dogmatically after this, and we finally dismissed the subject, going on to the easier topic of poetry, in the course of which Mr Prentice expressed strong views concerning the work of Mr William Watson and others, who gained public approbation but failed, it seemed, to secure any compliments from him. Near Barnstaple, he wanted to fix a train for the return journey; I said it was likely I should stay until the Monday, and advised him to do the same, giving himself thus the time to proceed with deliberation, and return to the essay after a first rebuff. Mrs Prentice, a

comfortable looking woman, met him ; they embraced affectionately, and G. W. P. said, "A shade stouter aren't you, my dear?" whereupon she strode off indignantly, and he had to hurry in order to catch her.

A carriage was hired at Torrington, and in going slowly up the hill it almost dazed me to think that I was so near to seeing Milly. At the farm-house I paid the driver, told him not to wait, and took my small bag.

"Your mistress in?" A middle-aged woman on pattens was sluicing down the red-bricked path leading to the front door.

"No," she answered.

"Is your master in?"

"No!"

"Miss Fowler at home?"

"No!"

"Nobody here but yourself?"

"There's the chickens."

"Just look here," I said, producing half a crown. "I want to see Miss Fowler very particularly. Give me all the information you can please."

"Hers gone to Lynton for the day," she answered, accepting the coin. "What might your name be, now?" I gave the information. "Heard talk about you," she went on, familiarly. "You'm the young London chap what behaved so bad."

"Has Miss Fowler gone to Lynton alone?"

"Mr Wreford's with her. I told 'em as they went off," she chuckled, "Lynton's always been a rare gude place for young courting couples. Going like that, mister?"

"Have to catch a train."

"Won't you take a mug of cider and piece of home-made cake, nor nothin'?"

I went back to Barnstaple and lunched with G. W. P. at the hotel, where the waiter brought newspapers because, I suppose, he observed that neither of us spoke during the meal. In waiting at the station for the 4.16, it occurred to

me that the lady I had spoken to might well have been the mistress of the farm ; her cautious replies accorded with this, and it was easy to imagine the description she would give of my hurried arrival, my questions and hasty departure ; a humorous line about her mouth did not encourage me to take sanguine views. This meant I had appeared ludicrous, and at my age this was the bitterest stab of all. At Yeovil I was in a blazing state of fury with everybody ; near Salisbury I resolved to adopt Len's methods, and in future to take no trouble about anyone but myself ; at Basingstoke I saw that Milly would settle down in Devonshire with Mr Wreford, who, it was to be hoped, was a presentable young man, a fit companion for such a dear girl ; at Vauxhall, where I awoke Mr Prentice, I had become a deeply injured but beneficent person, willing to look upon events with kindness tempered by a certain amount of jaded cynicism. One kind word from the ticket-collector would have induced me to burst into tears.

At Tavistock Place, Kitty's answer was waiting with a dozen other letters, and the opening with the old title, "Dear little brother-in-law," caused me to read on eagerly. A correct and a proper note, with not a word of complaint from start to finish. She had never thought for a moment that I should be influenced by the money which had come to her ; she knew me too well to imagine that. Urged me to believe she had no sort of grievance against me, or against any member of my family (this was the only allusion to Len). The money, however, had the useful trick of enabling her to do exactly as she wanted to do, and she had gone away ; her new address could not be given, for it was not at present known to herself ; another excellent reason existed with which she would not trouble me. A letter had been left for her step-mother, and if I could spare the time occasionally to run down to Hatcham, Kitty would feel grateful. I was, and always had been, a dear good boy, and, as for herself, she blamed no one, especially in view of the fact that she now felt happier than she had ever felt before.

Kitty hoped everything would straighten out for me ; hoped she would not be thought sanctimonious when she said she trusted God would bless me. If we did not hear of her for some time, we were not to assume she was anything but perfectly glad and peaceful.

“Try to consider yourself more,” the letter concluded, “and not be too ready to put your own happiness in peril. I regret nothing which has happened in the past, nothing excepting the part of the incident that affected you, and I would give a good deal to set this right. Use your best endeavours, and tell me some day that you have no grudge against me.”



## CHAPTER XVIII

### LEN ACCEPTS GOLD

IT seemed to me in my loneliness there was no good reason why Ernest Fowler should preserve his detached attitude, and I wrote a short letter to him; he did not reply. I wrote to Len, when he had been back in London a few months, suggesting again he should put me up for one of his clubs; he answered briefly that there was a rule forbidding membership to brothers; a misapprehension, as I found later. It looked as though I was never to enjoy even the privilege of being blackballed; necessary to pretend that one objected to clubs on principle. Happening to mention the subject to the proprietor of a trade journal with which Stemsons were doing business, he, to my astonishment, assured me nothing was easier than to become elected at that moment to one of several old-established institutions in the West End, particularly those which suffered from recent party differences and the falling in of leases. He took me off to an admirable club, gave me lunch, introduced me to some fellow members, explained to them that he felt anxious I should allow myself to be nominated, but that I was a reserved, obstinate chap, who declined to listen to reason, whereupon they requested a waiter to bring the candidate's book, and announced jovially that unless I consented to allow my name to be entered on a page there, I would not go out into St James's Street alive.

"You're as right as ninepence," declared my friend, confidently. "The only risk here now is with men who are known."

I spent a busy hour on the first evening after receiving advice of my election, writing notes on club paper to folk of

my acquaintance ; the first to Len, inviting him to dine with me, the second to Milly, the third to my mother. The communication to Milly required care and thought ; it contained a quantity of news, some references to the weather, congratulations on the improved state of affairs out at the Cape, and a polite reference to Mr Wreford ; if he was ever in town, it would be good of him to send a line, and to allow me to entertain him at the address which headed the note-paper. A reply to this came from the gentleman himself. Miss Fowler had been so good as to allow him to see my letter ; he was coming to London shortly, and if I arranged an evening he would make it fit in with his convenience. Len fixed a date and I wrote to Mr Wreford, giving this ; the two could serve to neutralise each other, and the presence of Len would save me from the contempt of waiters who might otherwise think I had no friend but an awkward youth from Devonshire. Also, if one determined to try powers of sarcasm on the West country guest, Len would prove a useful leader.

A report in the journals of a woman's body found at Beachy Head startled me to such an extent that I ran down there, affrightedly, by the first train ; my position at Stemsons gave freedom which enabled me to come and go. At the police-station the information was that the initials on the clothing assumed to be K. L. were in reality K. T., and a glance at the mortuary was enough to assure myself that the poor soul in no way resembled Kitty ; all the same, I broke the return journey in order to see Mrs Latham. Mrs Latham had accepted the resignation of crape ; I found her decked out in most of the colours known to a rainbow.

"As right down pleased to see you," she declared, "as though you were my very own boy. Upon my word, if you hadn't a mother of your own, and if it wasn't for the look of the thing, I'd set to and adopt you, Henry. You want someone to look after you."

"No reason why you shouldn't, Mrs Latham. You could

leave me then all these vast sums of money you have accumulated."

"You think I'm joking," she remarked, sedately. "Some day you'll find that when you're married, children, or the absence of them, make all the difference."

"I am marked out for a bachelor."

"Wait and see, Henry. Your brother—let me see, how long has he been married?" She counted on her fingers, and after an inquiring glance, conveyed regret at the absence of news. "I was thinking only the other day of you two boys, and the difference between you, and all at once, like a flash of lightning, I saw the truth about that letter. You were playing up to him. Your only idea was to get him out of a difficulty. If I'd had more sense, I should have seen it at the time. As it was, we let poor Latham go with the impression that you hadn't behaved so straightforwardly as you ought to have done."

"In the result, Mrs Latham, it appeared I had not succeeded in doing my brother a good turn. Hope he doesn't make it a grievance against me. Shouldn't like to think that."

"Bother him and his grievances!" she cried, warmly. "You and your mother fuss about him as though he was perfect. Makes me cross. I know too much of the world to think that about any man. To prove which," she went on, noting my gesture, "I may tell you, what I wouldn't tell everybody, and that is, I've had an offer—an offer of marriage from a very respectable gentleman." She lowered her voice impressively. "A people's churchwarden, if you please!"

I said this meant saving up for another wedding present.

"Not going to take him," said Mrs Latham, trembling with pride. "I'm going to keep him on the leash, so to speak, for a time, and then I shall have to say as nicely as I can that I've made two blunders already, and that people will begin to think I'm off my head if I make a third. Not that I dislike him,"

she added. "How old do you reckon, Henry, a woman ought to be when she gives up all thoughts of falling in love?"

"There's no maximum, Mrs Latham, and no minimum."

"Let's talk again about Kitty," she said, after considering this statement. "I know nothing more than you do, but what I do know is that just before she went away, she was brighter and more cheerful than I've ever seen her. Seemed satisfied, like. And it's certain we needn't be afraid that she'll do herself any harm, for one of the last conversations we had before she went off was about a poor girl who had been found in the Canal; Kitty said the girl had no right to do such a thing. I tried to explain to her the reason, but she said this made it worse."

"Len will be relieved to hear there is no risk of such a thing happening to her."

"I expect your brother Len," she retorted, "wouldn't much care if everybody drowned themselves, so long as he was safe on shore. That's all I'm going to say against him," hastily. "You and your mother are alike in that respect; one word about Len that isn't lavender water, and you're up in arms like a shot! But I must say what I think, sometimes; I remember a gentleman customer once said I was a plain woman in everything but looks. Can't you stay any longer, Henry? Do come down and see me as often as you can. I go and call on your mother sometimes just for the pleasure of talking about you. It isn't as though I'd a lot of relatives; if I had, they'd be buzzing around me now that I'm getting on in years."

Stemson accepted my invitation to join us at the dinner; we still mistered each other at office, but away from Queen Street this formality was waived, and at Palace Court, when the lady relative ceased talking of what she called the beau monde, he had more than once asked my advice concerning a new partner in the business; there were some candidates, it appeared, who had cash, some who had mental capacity, but Stemson required one possessing both, and begged me to



keep a gun ready that such a rare bird, if sighted, should be brought down.

Len, when I came out of the smoking-room of the club and greeted him, apologised for arriving early ; his wife had been seeing a specialist, and was away staying with friends in the country, and he found himself with nothing to do. It was not possible the surroundings of my club affected him, but, (if it can be said without conceit) perhaps I had gained an easier manner, one more like his own, since our last meeting, and it did seem for the first time we were talking on something like equal terms. He told me, before Stenson was announced, that a good, secure seat had at last been placed at his disposal, and when I offered my services, thanked me and mentioned that considerable efforts would not be required.

"Besides, your time is fully occupied now," he said. "I hear of you from one or two business folk of my acquaintance." A political personage to whom I had once casually spoken went by and nodded. "Introduce me," whispered Len, anxiously.

"Can't," I protested. "He probably doesn't know my name."

"Do as I tell you."

The man stopped at the swing doors and accepted my appeal graciously ; I thought Len began to talk with a shade too much eagerness, and the other seemed to take this view, for after a few moments he turned and gave his conversation to me, furnishing the name of the line of steamers which he had failed to recall during our talk of a few days previously. If I decided to do the trip, I must promise him to stay in Gibraltar at the Bristol, in Granada at the Washington Irving, in Seville at the Paris, in Tangiers at the Continental.

"Wish you hadn't taken him from me," complained Len, as the member went. "Five minutes with him would have been most valuable. Afraid one can still detect the old strain of selfishness in your disposition."

"Don't see how I could have forced him to talk to you," I remarked, with spirit.

"We will not continue the discussion," he said.

I took care that with Stemson he should have full opportunities, but Stemson, to my regret, had a slight touch of lumbago, and every other topic appeared to him irrelevant until he had explained the exact hour when the first twinge attacked him; the precise spot where it affected him, the advice given by an expert in Cavendish Square; there appeared a choice of two procedures, one to adopt the counsel and carry it out faithfully, the other to show contempt for the medical profession, and to declare that doctors constituted the most ignorant set of men on earth. Len glanced at his watch; I explained we were waiting for a young fellow from Devonshire.

"Is he walking all the way?" asked Len.

"He's a great friend of Miss Fowler's," I said. "You remember her."

"I seem to recollect!" he remarked.

"Mind you," said Stemson, "no one can imagine what the pain is like unless they've gone through it. The doctor tells me there's a lot about just now."

"Mr Wreford to see you, sir," said the page boy.

I went out into the hall prepared to set an awkward youth at his ease, and found a courtly, white-haired old gentleman.

"I have a message for you, Mr Drew," he said, as I helped him with overcoat, muffler and hat. "Miss Fowler sent her regards."

"Good of her."

"A most invaluable young woman," he said, following me. "Her assistance as secretary has made it possible to get on with some work that has been in arrears for a long time. A charming girl too, Mr Drew, with a certain rapidity of manner, very useful to those of us who live in the country. My wife and I sometimes induce her to play to us of an evening, and altogether she has become quite indispensable."

He proved slightly sententious in manner, but when I realised the delightful fact that here was no competitor, it seemed easy to forgive a small defect. After dinner, we went back to the smoking-room, and there the old gentleman showed to advantage, telling stories so aged that they were new to us, contesting Len's opinions on questions of the day with such perfect courtesy that my brother's methods appeared, by comparison, rough and curt. Mr Wreford had suffered as Stemson was suffering; recovered as he felt sure Stemson would recover, and my chief, showing both hopefulness and discouragement at this prophecy, took up, for a change, the question of a peculiar affection in the right elbow of which he claimed an exclusive monopoly. Len, as I edged my arm-chair in his direction, made an effort to arouse himself.

"So you're going in for globe-trotting, are you?" he said. "Hope you'll enjoy it more than I have ever done. Nothing will ever induce me to go out of England again."

"During the last hour," I remarked, "my views have slightly changed. Not at all certain now that I want to go away for a month. Tell you though what I should like to do, Len, some day, and that is for you and I to go off together."

"Where should we go?" he asked, animatedly. "Get a Continental Bradshaw and let us plan it all out."

"You see," touching the bell, "for years we have never had a good chance of a long talk; never the opportunities we had when I was a boy."

"Gorgeous idea!" he declared, taking the book from the waiter. "Far and away the best suggestion that ever came from you. Now then, let's see. Where do we start from?"

We worked out the journey, one taking the book from the other when difficulties arose, in the impatient manner that most exhibit when a time-table is in question; Len complained of the smallness of the print, but I found it presented no trouble. Sharing the interest and the joy, I pointed out

we should be making rather a wild rush of the trip : he said it was impossible for him to loaf ; the moment he arrived at a foreign town a keen desire possessed him to get away from it without delay ; if I came with him, I should have to be prepared for this.

"Well, that's settled," he announced, sitting back. "There's only one point ; I suppose you can afford it?"

"I'm a careful man."

"Haven't you middle-class people some ingenious trick of having a money-box on the mantel-piece labelled 'Holidays, into which you put all your very small silver? It's not a bad notion. I'm all in favour of thrift."

"Does the money come in well with you, Len?"

"Oh yes, yes," he answered, lightly. "Of course, no one has quite so much as he would like to have, and public affairs interfere to a certain extent, but I musn't grumble." He became didactic. "The general idea has always been that a man should make his pile before he begins to devote himself to the interests of his country ; consequence is that, by the time he takes up this work, he has exhausted himself and is only fitted for the task of either drawing, or riding in a bath chair. I'm doing the two together ; one will help the other." He stretched arms luxuriously. "Great advantage of public work is that it gives such excellent opportunities for encountering the mug. I was introduced to one the other day, and within twenty-four hours——"

I mentioned when he had finished the account that, speaking frankly, my sympathies were with the deluded party to the transaction ; Len said this was natural for I myself possessed many of the admirable virtues of a fool. This seemed to demand a short retort and I gave it, apologising humbly the moment that he touched my sleeve. The other two were still engaged in earnest conversation on ailments, and we both sat back, Len looking at the ceiling, I gazing at Len.

"Is this for one of your guests, sir?" asked the page



boy. Len leaned out of his easy-chair and took the letter from the tray.

"Tell my man he needn't wait," he said. "Excuse me!"

He opened the envelope, and stood upright.

"Great news," he exclaimed. "Magnificent news. Come over to the corner, Henry, and let me have a word with you."

"May I look at the letter, Len?"

"I'll tell you the drift of it," he answered, placing it in the breast-pocket of his dress-coat. "The envelope was marked confidential."

"Oddly enough I thought it was in your handwriting."

"Listen to me! It seems we're on the very edge of a bye-election in the constituency I spoke about; needn't go into details because you'll see all about them later on. Point is this; I shall want every penny I can put my hands on."

"Lucky that you have plenty."

"Plenty is a large word," he replied. "What I want to say is, that you have often professed a certain affection for me."

"A sincere affection, Len."

"Then prove it by scraping together every penny you can find, and let me have the whole amount by noon to-morrow!" He went back a couple of paces and surveyed me.

"There's only one objection."

"That you don't want to do it," he suggested, quickly.

"I do want to do it, and will do it, but the result must be that I postpone taking a step which has only seemed possible since the old gentleman over there made his appearance this evening. Milly is down in Devonshire and I want—I want to ask her to marry me."

"Seems," he remarked, drily, "that one half of my life is to be devoted to extricating you from amorous difficulties."

"That's not fair," I blazed out. Again a touch from him, and my ill-temper vanished.

"Just give me your answer, yes or no. You'll have it all back in six weeks ; two months at the latest. If you want security——"

"Your word is enough, Len. Mind you, the total sum may not be so large as you think."

"You can't lend me what you haven't got," he agreed, in reasonable tones. "I'm not asking you to do the impossible. You're giving up the idea of the Tangiers trip, and you can have no urgent need for money. Give me now all you have about you. How much will they cash here on your cheque?"

He made proper farewells to the two other guests, assuring them of the delight experienced in making their acquaintance, and in the room where his overcoat and hat had been left, I was able to hand to him a good fistful of sovereigns ; he slipped them carelessly into his trousers pocket. On the steps outside I waited to see him go.

"Run in!" he ordered. "You'll catch cold if you stand there." I went back to the smoking-room with these words of solicitude in my ears.

"My young friend," said old Mr Wreford, elaborately, "I am accustomed to early hours, and I hope you will excuse me."

"Eleven o'clock is my time," remarked Stemson. "Never out of bed a moment later."

"Mine is half past ten," said the gentleman from Devonshire.

"Too early," declared Stemson.

The new topic was argued, whilst I stood by their chairs, pretending to listen, but really engaged in my own thoughts. At last I was about to do something for Len, to prove to him I was prepared to make sacrifice for the sake of his interests. This was exactly what one had been desiring all through life, and reproof had to be mentally administered because there came a sensation of regret that opportunity arrived at the particular moment. I could, of course, write

to Milly and explain why I did not wish my appeal to be granted immediately, but this would necessitate a reference to Len, and Milly did not like my brother; it would give an excuse for charging me with an affection for him greater than the affection one had for her. Approaches must be made with great caution, and care not omitted. The two wranglers ended their debate by compromising on 10.45, and ascertaining that this precise hour had been reached, bustled off without further delay. Mr Wreford was staying at an old-fashioned hotel in Bloomsbury; I gained his permission to walk with him.

"Makes me feel quite the young bachelor again," he said, looking about as we went up Shaftesbury Avenue. "Great days, great memories. But no one who finds the right woman need envy his youth. Now, take your case, Mr Drew."

I was willing that my case should be considered.

"We are very anxious about Miss Fowler. We like her. We admire her. And to tell you the truth, my wife is a bit of a match-maker, and she gave me distinct orders before I came away that I was not to return until I had successfully carried out her instructions. What I recommend is that you go back with me and stay with us for a while, and there you will have opportunities—Well, my wife will see that you have opportunities. Trust her!"

"You think there's a good chance?"

"That," he said, judicially, "I am unable to guarantee. She is a reserved young person, and my wife—a brilliant cross-examiner, believe me, and not easily daunted—has, for once been beaten. For all we know she may decline to listen to you. It's quite probable she may receive you with a considerable amount of coldness. Mrs Wreford assures me that if she were in the girl's place, she would take up an extremely dignified attitude."

I piloted him across Cambridge Circus.

"Mr Wreford," I said, "I am not sure whether it is possible to make myself clear, but I hope you will under-

stand that if I do not marry Miss Fowler, there will be very little happiness in my life."

"Good!"

"At the proper time I shall use all my best efforts to induce her to forget about things that are past, and to persuade her to regard me again as——"

"Excellent!"

"But this is not the proper time. Just now, and for the moment, I am not in a position to make an offer, and I ask you to go back alone."

"Bad!"

"Go back alone, and report only that I inquired very earnestly after her welfare, and sent a kind message."

"Damnable!" ejaculated the old gentleman.

I found no reference in the newspapers to the election referred to by my brother, and one or two men in the City, and one or two men at the Club, who would be likely to know, assured me there was no chance of the immediate occurrence of such an event. When a proper time had elapsed I wrote to Len and mentioned that, in the circumstances, I was prepared for the return of the rather considerable amount advanced to him; wrote also to Mr Wreford, asking him to fix a date for my visit. Len replied, in what seemed a curt note, that no time had been indicated for repayment, and I must refrain from sending him tiresome and irritating communications; to the other letter, came, in answer, a postcard from some one informing me that Mr and Mrs Wreford and Miss Fowler had left for a long tour on the continent; at Mr Wreford's request no letters were being forwarded.



## CHAPTER XIX

### LEN CALLS AT QUEEN STREET

I AM particularly anxious not to say too much about myself because the career of Len is more interesting, but it is necessary to mention here that—this was in nineteen hundred and one,—my position at Queen Street improved so considerably that there was no excuse for begrudging the temporary absence of the savings lent to my brother. We started a trade journal, Stemson and I, a journal of which you have probably never heard so much as the title ; it is rarely to be found on the bookstalls, never in the reading-room of a club ; all the same a most excellent piece of property, and no reputable firm in that particular trade thinks of discontinuing either its subscription, or the illustrated advertisements. An elderly cashier resigned, and the farewell evening given to him at the Albion, caused Stemson to stay at home in Palace Court for a while ; I used to go over every night to get cheques signed, but this became irksome, and Stemson placed his autograph on the slips, warning me to be careful of these blank cheques ; his aunt mentioned the case of a Lord Somebody now residing for good reasons in the Argentine Republic. There was nothing astonishing, in the circumstances, that Stemson should regard his indisposition as serious, for a man never existed with a greater relish for ailments ; the singular thing was that the complaint proved to be acute, and the doctor explained to me the difficulty he encountered ; having always hitherto magnified the little weaknesses in order to gratify the patient, the trouble now was to persuade Stemson that the occurrence had a special character. At Queen Street, I took possession of the invalid's room, and senior clerks began to call me "sir."

It was Mrs Latham who first gave me information which others had kept to themselves. The old lady called at Queen Street one afternoon, and clerks at the counter assured her Mr Drew was deeply engaged, quite unable to see anyone unless an appointment had been made.

"Oh, I shouldn't have gone back home," she assured me, when we were alone, "without having a word with you, my dear. I was in business too long to feel inclined to take 'no' for an answer. What's all this about your brother Len?"

I had but glanced at the morning papers.

"It's nothing that'll appear in print," she said, lowering her voice, and at once allowing it to regain the usual volume. I stepped across and closed the door. "I made it a rule at the very start never to lend a single penny to any one, but it's a rule I've often broken, and if you want me to do it this time, why you've only to say the word. But I don't pretend I like doing it, and I shan't forget to tell him so. He's got no claim upon me, and he's no need to write as though borrowing a hundred pounds was doing me a great favour. Not a word, if you please, about interest! Not so much as a single word. I don't mind telling you I've been fairly lucky with my investments; it isn't always the widow that gets taken in with money matters, but at the same time I've got no spare cash to throw down a sink. I want to keep a hold on it, and want to make something out of it. Four per cent. is enough on good security, five per cent. is better and five and a half——"

At my interruption, my voluble friend opened her small wrist-bag and gave a click of the tongue, indicating despair.

"That girl again!" she cried, "I said to her when she was buttoning me up at the back, I said, 'Emily, don't you let me go without that letter on the dressing-table,' and she said, 'All right, ma'am, I'll remind you!' Remind me indeed! As I tell her, she thinks of nothing, nothing in this

world excepting it is a Royal Artilleryman over at Woolwich."

"Tell me what the letter said, Mrs Latham."

She was able to recite the communication verbally, from start to finish. The letter gave details of the last visit paid by Len's wife to a specialist, information repeated by Mrs Latham and explained in frank language that formed a tribute to my age and wisdom; what Len required was that another and a better and a more expensive man should be seen, and the money was required in case an operation should prove to be necessary. It was, he said, a case of life and death, and on Mrs Latham would rest the responsibility for any failure to do the right and proper thing.

"That didn't frighten me," she commented. "It's an old trick of the borrowing sort to try to put you in a corner and say, 'Your money or some one else's life!' But I thought I'd pop on my cloak and bonnet and run up here and let you decide, and what you say is to be done, shall be done. Whilst I think of it, just glance your eye over that and see what you think of it."

The circular was from the secretary of some charity with which I was not acquainted; appended was a form useful to those who desired to bequeath money to the institution.

"Being with no kith and kin," she remarked, using the phrase with a certain luxury, "it's high time I began to think about how to dispose of my little all. If I'd got kith and kin, it would be different, but they're things you can't order at the Stores. These affairs are all much of a muchness, I suppose, and I should like to make up my mind."

To exhibit the celerity with which we were able to deal with questions, I ordered Farrington to bring me all the available information within ten minutes. In regard to Len's letter, the question was not so easy to tackle. No reason to doubt his statement; on the other hand I was unable to give it confirmation for the reason that I had not heard from him since—— The last letter was produced and Mrs Latham, without ceremony, took it from me, and read.

"That settles it!" she announced. "Thought this might be his first experiment, but it seems to be at least the second, and goodness knows what its proper number is. I shan't lend that brother of yours a penny!"

"Then I must!"

"But you've done it already, my dear. You can't go on all your life paying out and paying out; you'll find, once he sees you're willing to do that, he'll be ready enough to let you do it. If I'd behaved in that way, there wouldn't have been no necessity for me to bother about a will. You ought to think of yourself. Some day you'll get married."

"There appears no likelihood of that."

"You'll get married," she persisted, "and towards the end the greatest joy that can come to you will be the thought that you can leave something to those that are dear and near to you. Concerning your brother, I never did like being taken in."

"Len is the last man to impose upon any one."

"I suppose I shall never acquire the taste for it, and I tell you what's occurred to me whilst I've been sitting here. I shall write him a letter — I miss Kitty so much where spelling is concerned—and tell him that if he'll give me the address of the medical gentleman, I'll send a cheque direct to the address, if so be that it's wanted."

Still no news of Kitty, she told me, and when I suggested that perhaps her step-daughter had married some good fellow and settled down comfortably, she pointed out, very wisely, that no reason would exist in that case for withholding particulars concerning the town, road, and number. Admitted, however, that Kitty was one of those somewhat flighty persons whom marriage occasionally converted into steady, thoughtful women. Farrington came in with satisfactory information concerning the charity, and Mrs Latham, in accepting it, announced that a load had been taken from her shoulders; I heard later that in going out she had pressed three-pence upon the dignified young gentleman (whose



father was in the Foreign Office) with the advice that he should not spend it on sweets.

My concern regarding Len became deepened when one Sunday evening I paid my usual weekly visit to Shardeloes Road—where I always quickened footsteps and kept eyes to the left in going by the Fowlers' street, and in spite of all this, never able to pass without experiencing a queer sensation at the throat—my mother showed me, with great satisfaction, a note from my brother, the first she had received for a long period of time. The letter made affectionate inquiries after her health, reported good accounts in this respect concerning himself, spoke with some acerbity of the influences that were working against him in public life, expressed confidence in being able to overcome them. The paragraph which gave my mother keenest satisfaction related to the house in Vanburgh Park, Blackheath; Len said he had reason to believe it might shortly be placed in the hands of Tokenhouse Yard; there would, he could assure her, be at least one bid for the property, and supposing the reserve figure proved not unreasonably high, one of his ambitions would find itself satisfied. My mother begged me to read this part again, to think of it, and to endeavour to imagine what it meant to her. Was it not a most fortunate thing that she had always preserved the die used in the old days for letter-paper; see what this would save!

"There was one thing that did remind me so of your poor father," she went on exultantly. "When I read it, I could almost hear him talking. It's in that same envelope, if you look again. Your father used to complain that, with all his money out in various what-do-you-call-'ems, he often didn't know where to put his hand on eighteen pence when he wanted to pay for a cab!"

The slip mentioned that if mother had twenty-five pounds in her savings book, she would be doing Len a special kindness by withdrawing it and sending the sum, in five-pound notes, by registered post at the earliest possible moment. The sum, it appeared, had, with the expert assistance of the

two lady lodgers, been so forwarded on the previous afternoon, and my mother was now looking forward gleefully to the receipt of another letter from her favourite son, acknowledging receipt.

We were discussing this, and I was turning the matter carefully over in my mind when a sharp double-knock came at the front door, and I answered it.

"Thank goodness I've caught you," panted my Aunt Mabel. "Been mentioning to the conductor of the tram coming along that I particularly wanted to see my other nephew, and he said he had no doubt but what I should. As I told him, people seem to imagine I'm made of money, but that's a mistake."

Aunt Mabel kissed my mother, accepted assistance with a certain proportion of her voluminous wrappings.

"It's all very well," she went on, breathlessly, "for some people, but I've still one daughter on my hands, and I've got to think, mind you. I pay out rates and taxes and so forth and so on that seem to increase year after year, and when they tell me that a lot of it goes in making people more healthy, and in giving them a chance of living longer, I answer back, 'What's the use of that to me? What I want to know is, where do I come in?'"

"Had such a nice letter from Len," interposed my mother.

"Oh, you've had one, too, then."

"Has he written to you, Aunt Mabel?"

"He's written to me," she replied, desolately, "and I've written back, and now I don't know whether I did the right thing or not in saying 'No!'"

I stiffened courage in leaving the house, and determined to make a call at the Fowlers. Mr Ernest only was in, said the maid, and Ernest came out, a pen over his ear, but he did not take the hand I offered. Yes, answering abruptly, he had received a letter from Len, but it seemed to him the Fowlers owed nothing to the Drews, or if they owed anything, it was not to be paid in money. His sister had not yet returned from the Continent; if he knew when she was likely

to return, the information would certainly not be given to me. Mr and Mrs Fowler were at church; when I expressed regret, he assured me they had no desire to meet me. I said a few words of strong approval concerning a story of his that had appeared in one of the current magazines.

"Look here, Henry," he said. "You're not a bad chap, and there may be another view of the affair that does not present itself to me, but you may as well understand that friendship is impossible between us, and when you see your brother you can intimate that this remark refers also to him. Len, I never did care for, but I don't mind saying that I did like you. I liked you so much that—Good night," he added, abruptly.

The rebuff had been courted, but this did not decrease the hurt; one had become less accustomed to the snub direct, and this instance was not easily dismissed from the mind. Considering the whole matter, I felt aggrieved at what seemed to me unfair behaviour, and gradually persuaded myself Len was to be seen, Len was to be advised; if necessary, Len was to be reproved. This decision, arrived at during a week of considerable pressure at Queen Street, with delicate questions to be settled in the absence of Stemson, and a sudden spurt of activity on the part of a rival firm of advertising agents, appeared to me later the result of a confused brain; it is fair to say in justice to myself that on the Friday I wired to him, after telephoning in vain to his club—it would have been so much easier to convey the reprimand without seeing him—it is fair to say I was not in full possession of my usual self-command; at the moment I felt prepared to blame him for everything that had gone awry, from the breaking of my engagement to Milly, down to the circumstance that an office boy had brought in for me buttered toast instead of dry. The telegram directed him to call at Queen Street at half-past six, at which hour the staff would have gone, and I should be alone. It was discovered afterwards that the lad who took telegrams for us to the post-



office in Cannon Street, having money trouble of his own, made a practice of whittling these down, deleting words he reckoned superfluous, and it is likely my communication reached Len in a form less polite than the state in which it left my table.

"Four wires, sir," said Farrington. "One appears to be private."

"Leave them there. I'll look at them directly."

"Do you wish any of us to stop, please?"

"I think you all go on the stroke of six," I retorted, testily. "That, I believe, is your invariable custom. The promptitude of your departure——"

"Don't mind waiting, sir, if you wish me to do so."

"I have already endeavoured to convey to you, Mr Farrington, that the reverse is my earnest desire."

They went off, one by one, two by two; the charwomen came talking shrilly of the defects of husbands until one, in placing a stool, legs upwards, on a desk, caught sight of me; whereupon they changed the topic and discussed, in benevolent tones, the brain worry experienced by gentlemen in business, the advisability of not over-stepping the bounds of energetic application. I walked up and down, hands deep in pockets, until the half hour was nearly reached; then washed at the stand behind the screen, practising the while in the mirror, an adjustment of features that should convey a wisely compounded blend of regret and disapproval.

"Gentleman to see you," said one of the charwomen.

"Little man," cried my brother, entering rapidly, "you're a dear, good chap, and I like you, but really you do select the most inconvenient hours for making appointments. This means that my wife will dine alone, and I shall have to snatch a bone at the club and eat it on the mat." He went on without listening to my first words of explanation. "You ought to get away before this, you know. No man of your position should be found staying late in the City: suspicious people begin to hint that he's only doing so in



order to cook the accounts. Or," he laughed, "to make experiments in handwriting."

He took up Stemson's cheque-book and glanced through the leaves. "No necessity for you to do that, I see. Do you mean to say he trusts you to this extent?"

"There is no reason," stiffly, "why he should not trust me to any extent."

"Of course, of course!" With a smile that made me repent the tone I had adopted. "I should feel exactly the same if I were your chief. Some day, the opportunity will come for me to show the deep regard I have for you. By the bye, I have great news. Your friend Miss Fowler is in town."

"No!"

"Pardon me," he insisted, genially. "Met her this afternoon in New Bond Street; stopped and spoke to her."

"That was good of you, Len."

"She asked about you, and I told her you were living in my old rooms. Shouldn't be at all surprised if you get a call from her there."

"How was she looking, Len? Did she speak of me with—with kindness? Do you know where she is staying?" I rapped out the questions eagerly.

"Where's your A.B.C.," he asked. I pointed to the book hanging at the side of the table. "Step into the outer office," he said, "and get the South Western book I saw hanging up there."

He was sitting on the corner of the table when I returned, choosing a cigarette from his silver case. Taking the timetable he examined a page hurriedly, exclaimed, "Shall only just get to Waterloo in time!" put on his hat and went to the door.

"I want to say something to you, Len," I called out. "An important matter!"

"Send me a note," he called over his shoulder. "And if it's anything I can do for you, rely upon me. Always glad to oblige you, for the sake of old times."

The meeting had not taken the turn I meant it to adopt ; the man at the wheel shouldered away and control exercised by an invited passenger. There came relief in the thought that harsh words had not been used, but I could scarcely persuade myself the event was cancelled ; it was but postponed. Len would have to be told, and told by me, that he must not pester everybody for money ; if he stood in urgent need of cash, the correct course to pursue was to come to me, see what could be done, and receive the lecture I prepared on the advantages of thrift. But all this seemed a matter of less importance now : the information that Milly was in London modified, obliterated everything else. Len's suggestion that she might call at Tavistock Place startled me into activity, and I bustled around, setting papers to rights, called out to one of the women requesting her to whistle for a cab. The cheque-book which I opened had been reversed in position.

"There was one just driving up," announced the woman, breathless after hurrying up the staircase, "so I told him to wait."

Outside on the landing, a young woman, well-dressed, examined in the dim light the names on the large framed indicator set against the wall.

"Milly dear !" I cried.

I led her through the office where the two charwomen, at the sight of us, stood at attention, brooms upright. In Stenson's room I pulled the easiest chair to the table and made her sit down.

"Don't close the door," she said.

I daresay the words and phrases could be recovered if I taxed my memory, but there is no necessity to do so. Kneeling by the side of the chair (until I presently encountered the astonished gaze of the two ladies who should have been occupied in sweeping) I explained everything frankly, endeavoured to make her see that I had always loved her, that everything of which she had a right to complain was done in the interests of Len. It appeared she had

met Kitty at Eastbourne, and Kitty's evidence coincided with mine.

"You've improved so wonderfully," I declared with enthusiasm. "I thought there was no room for that but——"

"Listen!" she interrupted. "What I want to know is, how far you are prepared to go for the sake of your brother?"

"There are no limits in that direction."

She thought for a moment, and I kissed her hand to reassure her.

"I met him this afternoon," said Milly.

"I know."

"I didn't like the look of him."

"You never did, dear. He came here half an hour ago, and I do think if you had seen him then, as I saw him, you would have been tempted to alter your opinion."

"Did he want money, Henry?"

"Now that's unjust of you," warmly. "You've heard something from Ernest."

"I'm sorry," she said, with her finger on my wrist, "if I do him an injustice. But I confess to the feeling that I owe him a grudge. I've had some rather dark moments since I saw you last."

I kissed her again.

One of the women, rapping cautiously at the door, said the cabman desired to know whether he was to wait all night. I tried the lock of the safe, glanced around and noticed I had forgotten to put away the cheque-book.

"Anything the matter?" asked Milly, coming to my shoulder.

"There's a blank cheque missing," I remarked, puzzled. "And the counterfoil's gone, too. I shouldn't be so foolish as to tear out the counterfoil."

"It was signed?"

"Yes."

"Crossed?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Then," she said, "it would be impossible for anyone to fill it in for an amount and obtain the sum across the counter of the bank."

"Milly," I remarked, still examining the book, "you seem to have accumulated an enormous amount of business information."

"At what time did your brother leave here?"

"Ten minutes to seven."

"That's all right, then," with relief.

We walked back from Lombard Street after leaving the note that requested payment to be stayed, and going along the nearly empty Queen Victoria Street, found ourselves on the delightful embankment, where we could walk arm-in-arm without exciting attention on the part of any but the couples adopting a similarly affectionate manner.

At the old-fashioned hotel in York Place, I was introduced to Mrs Wreford, received by Mr Wreford with something of the manner of the father of the prodigal son. My landlady's servant mentioned the next morning that it put fresh heart into her to see me once more making a decent, respectable breakfast, more like that of an honest Englishman, less like that of a French foreigner.



## CHAPTER XX

### LEN IN OUR PRAYERS

THE confidential agent, who did special work for the firm, was made to understand that the matter had to be cleared up ; necessary, of course, the guilty party and only the guilty party should be traced and discovered, but it seemed likely he would save time by directing his special energies in one direction. No charge would follow ; a full confession must, however, result in instant discharge. Tiller, the inquiry specialist, returned in twenty-four hours with a complete biography of young Farrington ; it appeared he had recently married (unknown to his people, and a secret from us). Becoming more irritable with all this before me, I rang for the young man, told Tiller to go behind the screen, and entered upon a task of cross-examination conducted on my part with warmth ; on the part of the youth with a coolness that aggravated my annoyance. At the end I found myself being cross-examined by young Farrington and compelled to admit that I suspected him and suspected no one else, upon which he offered to resign ; I said this would not do at all. It was for him to prove innocence before taking leave of Queen Street. He answered, with respect, that the onus lay upon me ; I retorted, with no respect at all, that there was small inclination to chop words with him ; if he wished to prove his innocence, all he had to do was to produce the guilty party.

“ Meanwhile,” doggedly, “ you must understand, Farrington, you are under suspicion, and it is only fair to warn you that you will be watched wherever you go.”

Here he broke down, appealed to me across the table to do nothing of the kind ; he was prepared to

admit anything and everything if I would but allow him to go.

"Return the blank cheque then."

"I can't, sir," he said.

"Now, my boy," good temper returning, with a paternal manner for companion, "I begin to feel very sorry for you. You were led, in a moment of temptation, to do something you now bitterly regret, and that is a situation which in various forms occurs to every one of us. Directly the act was done, you repented. Directly the act was done, you discovered how useless the results were. If you have not destroyed the cheque and the counterfoil, you will return both to me within the space of one week from this moment, and I am willing to agree you shall not be shadowed until that time is up."

"I'll do my best," he said, after a pause.

Tiller congratulated me very heartily on the skill exhibited, and although one knew him for a sycophant, I felt gratified to receive his compliments; they rounded off the descriptive report to be given to Milly. She, with a particular interest in the matter, seemed rather disappointed when I gave this; asked for further particulars concerning the youth and his girl wife; wondered what would become of him when he found himself with no occupation; I charged her with a softness of heart where any young couples were concerned, and she answered that this apparently could at any time be remedied by taking up some occupation in the City. We went off to see a musical comedy, the last nights of which were announced, wherein a chorus of the modern sort appeared, admirably costumed and prepared to accompany the principals faithfully, whether the principals decided to visit a hydropathic establishment on the occasion of a fancy-dress ball, or to proceed, for no obvious reason, to Pekin. The Wrefords very wisely declined to come with us, and I, sitting back, gave the interest others were extending to the play in the direction of my dear girl. It was wonderful the change a few years had effected. I could remember, on the occasions

when we used to go together to the amphitheatre or gallery, she always then practised a series of running comments, such as, "Oh here he comes again; wonder what he'll be up to this time!" or "Wouldn't believe anything a woman like that told me!" or "Well, he must be a silly to be taken in!" She did once during the evening hand me the opera-glasses and beg me to gaze at a good-looking young person in the chorus, and my answer gave gratification, without prompting the nudge of reproach that would have been given in earlier days.

"Being with you," I declared, fervently, as we came out, "induces me to feel on good terms with all the world." I asked the commissionaire to find a hansom; Milly suggested the night was sufficiently fine to enable us to walk. "Don't want to think I have a grievance against anybody; don't want to think anyone has a grievance against me."

"In that case," she said, "try to be very good to young Farrington."

A tall youth standing near the stage door turned swiftly; reddened on seeing me, and lifted his hat. The pretty girl whom Milly had noticed came through, and the two went off talking animatedly.

"That's the very man," I cried. "And I put it to you, dear, plainly; is it right for a clerk in the City earning a hundred and twenty-five pounds a year to be paying attentions to a young woman in the chorus?"

"You could easily pay him more, Henry."

I turned the conversation in despair of being able to induce her to take the reasonable, the common-sense view. To the remark that I greatly desired a meeting of reconciliation with her people, she showed no opposition; as we walked arm-in-arm with my hand touching a place near her palm that the glove did not cover, we arranged details.

"No!" she said, promptly, in reply to another proposal. "Not your brother. If he comes, everything may be spoiled."

"Will you never persuade yourself to see the good qualities in Len?"

"My eyesight is excellent," she remarked, "and when the good qualities become apparent, I feel certain I shall recognise them. Don't let us talk about him," she begged, earnestly. "You and I agree about everybody and everything else."

"When Len gets to the top of the tree," I declared, "all the world will be looking up to him, as I look up to him now."

We reached the steps of the small hotel and waited there.

"Meanwhile he comes first with me," I added.

Milly gazed forward at nothing with a good deal of attention.

"That's not quite according to the rules," she pointed out, gently. "I'm afraid mine is only what they call book knowledge——" I interrupted with an emphatic declaration of content at this assurance. "But the idea always is, I believe, that perfect love between a man and a woman means that each takes a foremost place in the other's esteem."

"My dear sweet," I cried, earnestly, "surely its enough for you to be certain that no other girl has any share in my affection. All the time you were away from me I never thought or dreamt of anyone but you. Do believe that, please. Its perfectly and absolutely true. And I'm so happy in the knowledge that you have come back to me." Milly corrected. "That I have come back to you," I amended readily, "that I could do anything, everything you wanted me to do. Within reason."

She laughed at the hedging words, and played with the links at my wrist. "Suggest something," I urged, "I want to do penance. Mention something extremely difficult, and let me have a try at it. Give me a chance of proving to you how deep and sincere my affection is."

"Do you know," she said, "this is the first time that you have really made love to me? When I was away down in



Devonshire, it was the hardest thought I had to endure, that you had never been down on your knees to me. Boy and girl love is all well enough, but what we all want is the dramatic situation. We want the man to come upon us like a hurricane, and sweep us off our feet in a wild gust, giving us no time to argue or deny. That's the convention, and books keep it up, and the result is that any woman who misses it feels she has been cheated, and——"

Milly declared, good-temperedly, that the place was not suited for experiments, and that the eyes of the hall porter were upon us.

"Now, look here, dear man," she said. "Let's talk quietly, and don't you assume again that I am giving you hints. We were speaking about Len, and there's something else I want to say about him. I don't ask you to do anything unbrotherly, and I don't ask you to do anything that isn't kind, but I see quite clearly that unless we keep ourselves at a distance from him, there's a good chance he may interfere again with our happiness."

"You are doing him an injustice."

"Just think for a moment," she went on, "what our happiness means. I've had a chance of realising facts lately, you must remember. I've had the opportunity of seeing what it means when happiness hurries past, and one can't catch it. You and I ought to have about thirty or forty years more of life; those are the figures on our current account. Now, supposing I am the first to exhaust the balance, and to pay in my last cheque."

I protested, almost tearfully, that such a possibility was too painful and too dreadful for contemplation; begged the dear girl to cheer up and not to take mournful views.

"I'm not in the least melancholy, boy; I only want to state the case clearly. What I wish to insure against is not death, or fire, or burglary, but remorse. I don't want

when we become old, that either of us shall look back and regret some blunder which could have easily been avoided. Some disasters will happen that could not be foreseen and we may regret these, but we shall not have to blame ourselves for them. Your brother Len represents one of the troubles which can be dodged. You have done enough for him: most people think you have done too much. Close the account now, and don't add anything more to the debit side. Pretend," she urged, "pretend there's no more room on the page. Do this, and I'll love you all my life."

I walked up to Jermyn Street and back before replying.

"You wouldn't like me to give you a promise and then break it, Milly?"

"You are not likely to do that."

"Then please, please, let matters remain as they are. You don't understand how I feel in regard to Len. I always worshipped him; I can't cancel my affection for him now. I must do all I can to help him, but, if you like, I'll guarantee to do nothing without consulting you."

"And having asked for my advice," said Milly, looking curiously into my eyes, "you will, of course, do just what you have already decided to do. Henry, you're a queer boy. You always were. I expect, after all, you're doing exactly what you think you ought to do."

"No," I cried, "I'm doing exactly what I'm bound to do."

We talked more quietly after this, and I told her all I had suffered during her absence, and Milly told me all that she had been called upon to put up with it in the same period. It was very pleasant, this exchange of retrospection. and I should not like to be called upon to say, with accuracy, how many times I broke off to assure her that she was the best and dearest girl in the whole, wide world, or how often Milly pointed out that she happened to be but one out of the two or three million members of her sex

living in London, and called upon me to explain why out of all this number I had chosen her. I answered that she alone was perfect, but Milly shook her head very decisively at this.

"Even you are not that," she contended. "But you're a good fellow, and some day you are going to be my own dear—" She whispered the last word at my ear, and ran in.

I found myself resuming a habit of whistling when at my dressing table in the mornings; men in the City said I looked better, saying it in a deeply aggrieved tone, as though demanding an explanation. The City is something of a forcing house, and it proves so common for men with special responsibilities to gain there an appearance in advance of their years that only the exception is considered worthy of comment; I have an idea Time is kindest in general to those who pursue anything but money. The artists of my acquaintance keep amazingly youthful; Ernest Fowler, rather scanty of hair on the top of his head, has at the present moment scarcely a line on his face; the few actors I know are precocious juveniles. In the City we acquire a harried, anxious look that comes of hunting and being hunted at the same time, and success rarely arrests greyness; you will see greater evidence of worry in first-class compartments of suburban lines than in the third. The reluctant compliments paid to me after the return of Milly encouraged a closer regard to personal appearance, and I gave up the services of a gentleman in Cornhill, who had been in the habit of clothing me as he pleased, and went to Maddox Street, West, where my anxiety to obtain a perfect fit caused the authorities to make inquiries, and this, in one way, proved unfortunate, for it enabled them to trace an outstanding account of some importance against Len.

"You wouldn't care to settle that, Mr Drew. You'll say, very properly, that it has nothing whatever——"

"On the contrary," I declared. "Easiest matter in the

world to send you a cheque, and I can obtain the amount when I next see him."

"Now," said the Maddox Street firm, with evident relief, "now we can get to business."

A woman said once that being admirably clothed gave a feeling of holy calm that religion had never afforded to her; my own sex is not altogether incapable of sharing this. I wore my best and newest whenever the opportunity came of seeing the lady who, when I once spoke of her as my fiancée, instructed me to substitute the word sweetheart. Warned by the risks already endured, I comported myself with such deference that the wonder is I did not become a permanent slave, and she a fixed, unrelenting despot; it was only at her urgent request, that I took up the custom of, now and again, expressing an opinion differing from that which she held. Even then, I could not resist the temptation to own myself, on the least excuse, in the wrong, so that discussion concerning a play we had seen, or a book we had read, always proved extremely brief.

"I see what you mean, dear girl, and I do believe you're right."

"Don't say that, Henry, unless you are perfectly sure."

"But I haven't the least doubt about it!"

"I don't profess to be always correct," she urged.

"You would be quite justified in doing so."

Milly re-organised the situation on safer lines. There was to be no disagreement in regard to our mutual affection, no question of this, but in regard to other matters, each to have a free mind and express thoughts and opinions freely. The new plan certainly gave a considerable increase of animation to our meetings, and I found I had to read up certain subjects, in order to meet my dear girl with something like credit, for the time in Devonshire and the time abroad had not been wasted, and I could scarcely help entertaining a deep regard for Mr Wreford's library. Apart from matters that presented themselves to different people in different ways, there was one in regard to which we felt



a deep and particular interest, namely, the arrangement and furnishing of the house. I suppose no establishment came so near to perfection in theory. In every house we visited, some good point was selected and taken away. Here, a parquet frame for a square carpet; there, a trap-door at the side of the dining-room for transit of plates; in another, ingenious arrangement of electric lights; we were scarcely out of the gates ere notes began to be compared.

"Did you notice, Henry——"

"I wonder, Milly, whether you happened to observe——"

A rare good game, and I doubt whether it equals anything in life, excepting the earlier joys that come with the present of a box of bricks. Sometimes, our plans resembled those of infant days in that a clumsy jerk, or an effort to build too high, caused a collapse; certain details proved impossible, and occasionally investigations concerning expense took away our breath.

We could scarcely avoid observing at this time how determinedly the world smiled at us. People nodded heads in a determinedly amiable manner; when we entered a room the cry of "Why, here they are!" informed us that we had been the immediate subject of conversation, and this proved less disconcerting than the sly efforts to ascertain what we really wanted as a wedding present; a casual reference to some article, and we could hear the "Ah!" of satisfaction, see the exchange of important glances between members of the family. Also, we found—or pretended to find—some perturbation in the horrid thought that perhaps, after all, we were not treading the primrose path.

"I want to ask you a very serious question," Milly would say, smoothing her muff, "and you must answer it quite frankly and truthfully." I protested that no other mode of replying was open to me. "Everything depends on this, and if you like, you can take your time about it; there's no necessity to tell me what I wish to know at this very moment. Think it over and give me the answer when

we meet next. It's much too important to be treated hastily."

I pointed out that the subject had not yet been stated.

"I want to ask you whether you think you really care for me well enough to justify our marriage."

On other occasions, it would be I who put this solemn and distracting point, and Milly who argued there were no grounds for my fears; reproved the want of faith. In either case, we succeeded in convincing by kisses, and it seems just possible the whole argument may have been started in order to give excuse for this admirable remedy. We did not speak now of Len, but every other subject under the sun was discussed, and I found it very delightful to share with Milly the anxiety created by a slight gathering at the back of my neck; to accept her profound sympathy, and listen to her recommendations concerning treatment; on my side, I gave her the benefit of advice concerning dress for the coming season, and communicated views with regard to the new shape in ladies' hats. In a properly constituted world, every young man and every young woman would be as happy as Milly and I were at that period.

The evening at my rooms when the treaty of peace was signed began in a certain atmosphere of awkwardness, and it was soon made clear that Milly's father and mother were not prepared to exhibit the graciousness over my return that had been shown by Mr Wreford. Milly and I worked hard and determinedly in the interests of good-will; it was not until the mother, as I conducted the party around the sitting-room, calling attention to some original black and white drawings on the wall, found her own photograph set in a silver frame, and ascertained by private inquiry from my landlady's servant who brought in coffee, that it had not been placed for this single occasion in a conspicuous corner, but always stood there—not until then did the mist clear away. Mr Fowler was thinking about taking his superannuation and, this arranged, meant to retire to the country—

"With the missis," he explained, humorously, "unless she'd rather be separated from me."

—To the country, where they could cultivate the garden in some village which boasted no ownership of a railway station. Mr Fowler did not greatly mind if he failed again to hear an engine whistle, and his wife agreed her appetite for London had been fully satisfied.

"There's the question of Milly," she remarked to me, aside. "Ernest, of course, is all right, and I think he's going to have the sense to remain a bachelor. But what to do with Milly is the thing that bothers me."

"I can settle that, Mrs Fowler."

After a moment she nodded. "Only you musn't make too sure of her, even now. There's a lot of attention still outstanding."

"The attention shall be paid," I declared.

Ernest, when he came, brought a copy of his new book as token of renewed friendliness, and in answer to my jumbled effort at explanation, protested that ancient history afforded him but little interest; he had been trying his pen at a romantic novel of the fifteenth century, and found himself forced to tear up the sheets owing to the difficulty of finding a sufficient number of ejaculations appropriate to the time, fitting to the period. Current years were good enough for him, said Ernest; he had no wish to make friends with the middle ages.

"And we needn't say any more about it, after this," he remarked, "but I assure you I'm honestly glad the trouble is all over. Take care it is not allowed to break out again, won't you? Your own life is a great deal too important. You understand what I mean?"

We were enjoying the evening placidly, and Milly was unlocking her violin case, when the maid announced that a lady wished to see me, a lady who declined to give her name; I could see Mrs Fowler's eyebrows rise, and it was impossible to misapprehend the meaning of her short cough. Below, in the hall, I found Mrs Len, and I had to beg and

pray of her to come up, in order that no shadow might affect my reputation in the exceptional circumstances; she smiled, in a tired way, and agreed if I would but tell her the truth. I assured her that to do this was, with me, by no means unusual.

"I want to ask you something," she said, "and here is where I require exact information. Can you tell me if my husband has been borrowing, or attempting to borrow? And has he any right to have in his possession—?" She gasped and stopped.

"Len has been trying to get money," I acknowledged. "The fact worries me a good deal because I know it means he has been worried. But I can tell you he has been able to get nothing out of any of my acquaintances, if that will reassure you in any way."

"And concerning yourself?"

"You needn't bother about that."

"He has paid it back then?"

"Mrs Len," imploringly, "every moment we are wasting down here means a decrease in my character upstairs. Do come along and be nice to my friends. They know your husband very well, but perhaps you needn't say much about him to them."

"The topic," she said, preceding me slowly up the stairs, "is not one of which I care to speak to strangers. Scarcely to friends."

I could see when the sitting-room was reached, how white she had become, thinner too; but for the voice I should not have believed her to be the woman who had taken, some time previously, the news of her money troubles with so much composure. Milly induced her to come to the fire, fetched a hassock, and there Mrs Len, taking off gloves, held out ringless hands to the fire as though the night were cold. She took a glass of claret, and the rest of us, retiring to the window, left them, until presently I heard her say to Milly something about never depending on anybody but oneself, and this seemed to me such a cynical



view to put into my dear girl's mind, that I rejoined them.

"Am I to go now?" she asked.

I wanted her to stay until she had rested completely, but the others announced that they were going (Mrs Fowler always mentioned the fact that she had to cross the river as one might speak concerning the Atlantic Ocean) and Milly whispered to me that someone ought to accompany Mrs Len. In Tottenham Court Road, the New Cross people stepped into a yellow omnibus, and it was good, in watching the hands that waved, to feel that perfect friendship had been restored. A touch from my companion aroused me.

"Something else I wanted to ask you about," she said, pressing fingers to eyes, "and I can't recall it."

"Probably nothing of importance. You may think of it in the cab."

"Do you mind—do you mind coming along with me?"

"Of course I will. You feel nervous of being alone."

"It is not that," she answered, falteringly. "But Len does not allow me to have any money. I had to borrow from one of the maids in order to come here this evening."

It occurred to me as I helped her into the hansom, that the lot of a husband who could not trust his wife in financial matters was scarcely an enviable one; the remark seemed to take the roof from the household, gave one an opportunity for peeping inside. The situation became clear to me; Len had a partner accustomed to spend money without thought, and because of her inability to practise habits of thrift, he was being compelled to make endeavour to raise money. I told myself as the hansom went along Goodge Street, there undoubtedly existed good reason for Len's conduct. It had been a mistake, this marriage, and one could understand it was not helped by the fact that June, in wedding October, had found her changing swiftly to November. When a lamp-post sent its light for the moment into the cab, I noticed

she was crying silently, and whilst sympathising with her to some extent, it was impossible to deny that this scarcely added to her attractiveness.

"You won't mind what I am going to say, Mrs Len," I remarked. "Somebody ought to say it to you, and perhaps I am the fittest person to do so. We haven't seen much of each other, but we are relatives by marriage."

"Seems impossible that you and he are brothers."

"Relatives by marriage, and I must talk to you as though you were my own sister. You are not helping Len as you ought to help him. What he wants just now is a cheerful, encouraging companion, one ready to see everything as he sees it, to side with him whatever happens."

"Is it possible," she said, turning to me sharply, "is it possible you would believe the truth if it were told to you?"

"I should believe nothing to the discredit of my brother." She gave a gesture of hopelessness. "And you would do well, believe me, to follow my example. When Len gets on in the world and becomes successful, you will have some bitter moments if you are unable to say that you helped him in every possible way, that you stood by him at times when others deserted. I shouldn't care to be you, Mrs Len, if that ever comes. I am a man of business and——"

"You have a clerk named Farrington in your office," she remarked, inconsequently. "I knew some of his people."

"He is under a cloud just now," I replied. "If you want to say anything in his favour, postpone it until he has cleared himself."

"I wonder," said Mrs Len, looking straight before her, and going as it seemed to a fresh topic, "I wonder if people who have been blind from their birth find any real satisfaction when they are enabled to see as others do. Or whether it may be that sometimes they would prefer to go on under the old conditions."

The maid who answered my ring accepted charge of

her, in a manner that suggested previous experience ; it was a genuine relief to know that some woman was ready to take care of Mrs Len.

Young Farrington, at the end of the fixed time, made formal appeal for an interview, and I received him with a proper air of austerity. He seemed distressed ; I ordered him to sit down at the opposite side of the table, and to take his time over the statement. A heavy post delivery came in, and he waited whilst I looked through some of the letters.

“ Now ! ”

“ Want to say first of all, sir,” he began, “ that there now exists no reason why you should not set some one to follow me, if you think it necessary. The fact is my wife and myself have been adding to our small income by singing in the chorus at a theatre—it only meant three pounds a week but that helped—and she was particularly anxious no one who knew us should become acquainted with the circumstance. In the new piece, a very good part has been given her, with two songs ; two ! And now she is willing, and I am willing that everyone shall know. She’s an extraordinarily clever girl,” he remarked, with pride. “ Seems to be nothing she can’t do. We have a small cooking-stove in our flat, and I assure you the meal on Sundays that she prepares——”

“ There is the question about the missing cheque.”

“ I am coming to that,” he answered, more soberly. “ Hope you won’t think I took too much upon myself in making inquiries, but it seemed a matter of serious importance to me. You thought I had taken it, and you argued, if you will remember, that it was for me to prove that you were wrong. That is my excuse for the steps I have taken.”

He took a note-book from his pocket.

“ You filled in,” he went on, “ you filled in a cheque just before half-past five, and the envelope containing it went off by that night’s post. The cheque was 30 over B.011317 ;

the missing cheque, as you know, was numbered 011318. No one but myself came into this room to see you between that time and five minutes past six."

"It was just six when you were here, Farrington."

"At five minutes past six we were all gone, and the charwomen were here. I have seen them, and they tell me you had two callers after we left."

"One was my brother; the second the lady to whom I am engaged."

"So I find," he remarked. "I have not the honour of Miss Fowler's acquaintance, but I know your brother's wife. I went to Mrs Drew—she was Mrs Woodrow when my people knew her—and explained fully the extremely awkward corner in which I found myself. She went at once to a desk and produced the cheque with its counterfoil."

"How could she have gained possession of it?"

"Sorry to have to say," answered young Farrington, "that the desk was your brother's!"

"Of course!" I cried, slapping the table, after a moment's pause. "Farrington, it all comes back to me. Len wanted a blank cheque, and I, instead of tearing one from my own book, must have torn one from the other."

"Mrs Drew informed me that he banks at Risley's."

I sat back in the round chair, and clasping hands behind my head, blinked at the ceiling. Young Farrington snapped the elastic-band around his note-book, and waited.

"Shall I take these letters, sir?" he asked, respectfully.

"I must do something for you," I said, in a hesitating voice. "We will see if an increase can be managed before Mr Stemson returns."

"I can keep my mouth shut, without that."

"There's an explanation somewhere, but you see, don't you, how easily people might misunderstand an incident of the kind."

"You did yourself, sir."

"And after all, there's no harm done. A cheque of the kind is not negotiable."



"It looked to me," he said, "as though some clumsy attempt had been made to erase the crossing."

"We needn't discuss the matter any further," I decided. "Much obliged to you for the trouble you have taken. Just wait while I see if there's anything urgent in these other letters."

One in Len's handwriting was amongst the pile, and I threw the rest aside, standing up and reading the pencilled note it contained.

"Now look here, Farrington," I said, impressively. "Just look here and remember this incident all your life when you find yourself tempted to take harsh views. Here is a letter from my brother returning the crumpled cheque. He tells me that having no matches he wanted a spill with which to light his cigar from the gas jet on the way down the staircase; he discovered just in time he had made the stupid blunder of tearing a slip out of the cheque-book. 'I return it herewith' he writes, 'and I do hope the silly mistake has caused no inconvenience!' That clears the whole matter up satisfactorily," I concluded, triumphantly, "and it ought to be a warning to us not to decide hastily where other people are concerned." In this country, Farrington, a man is assumed to be innocent until he is proved to be guilty."

"That's what I thought, sir!"

I went through the remainder of the communication when Farrington left the room. Len said he had much pleasure in also enclosing a cheque for the sum due to me; he hoped I had not been inconvenienced by the delay, but several unexpected claims had prevented him from settling the amount. (By an oversight, he had made an alteration in the body of the cheque without initialling it, and I posted it back for this to be done; I never found out whether he received it.) He felt distressed about his dear wife, for she seemed to get the queerest notions into her head, notions which, the doctor said, were not unusual with a woman of her age, but were, all the same, perturbing to Len. Would I

please give his love to mother, and ask her to look out for great news in the evening paper?

I ran down to New Cross that night, taking with me a journal which announced that Mr Henry Drew had been selected as prospective candidate for a constituency (not the borough of which he had once spoken) where the member was seriously ill; I took with me a Whittaker's Almanac and, together, over the deal table in the kitchen, we traced the result at the general election when a handsome majority had been given to the representative. My mother, taking that gentleman to have been but an ordinary man, and knowing Len to be an extraordinary man, suggested this majority might well be doubled; I promised that no efforts on my part should be wanting. We talked of him affectionately as we had done in the old days. I did make some reference to Mrs Len, but my mother said some women did not know when they were well off, and she had little patience with them. Instead of being grateful, here she was, apparently, going about grumbling and complaining! My mother decided that when the time came for taking the house at Blackheath, much diplomacy would be required in so far as Mrs Len was concerned.

"Mr Leonard Drew, M.P.!" she cried, delightedly. "Henry, I look to you to see that he gets in. If he doesn't, I shall never forgive you, so there! And we must be prepared to spend our last penny, if needs be, so that Len realises his ambition. Blood is thicker than water, Henry."

"Some folk seem to think they are one and the same, mother. They don't recognise the difference."

"Everything comes right with Len, if they only give him a reasonable time."

She looked again through her spectacles at the short paragraph.

"I don't know," she remarked, hesitatingly, putting them back in the case, "whether you'll reckon me old fashioned, or religious, or silly, but do you consider, Henry, there would be any objection—say so if you think so; don't mind

my feelings—the young ladies being out and us all alone in the house, to we two going down here and asking for help to be given to Len in this. Understand, don't you? You kneel at your chair, and I'll kneel at mine. I should be doing it more often only for my rheumatism. Daresay though, He makes allowances!"

We prayed silently for Len's success.

## CHAPTER XXI

### LEN AS A CANDIDATE

I MISSED the three last days of the contest ; nothing but my brother's urgent instructions would have persuaded me to do this. Stemson had returned, so completely filled with complaints that no part of the human body could be mentioned without eliciting information of a grisly nature ; he was good enough, at intervals, to say the work had gone on moderately well in his absence, and indeed I had secured some good contracts from firms whose representatives admitted the only reason for not completing them earlier had been that they could not stand Stemson. His presence gave me the opportunity of giving a fortnight of afternoons and evenings to the constituency which Len was fighting, to the management of those who came to help, the furnishing of useful hints.

"You can't be too careful," Beecher and the other local authorities told us. "Our people are nearly all church or chapel, and the duller you are the better the chances."

It was a good deal to ask of my brilliant brother, and travelling with him across country from meeting to meeting, one could but admire the efforts he made to curb his usual raciness of manner. He had several methods, one of which could generally be selected and adopted, from the bluff, hearty style with—

"I don't mind confessing to you, gentlemen, that I'm a man who has made his own way in the world, that all the runs I score are made off my own bat. The middle-classes, I belong to ; my brother Henry sitting over there in the back rows can confirm what I say. Henry, stand up and let them



have a look at you!" to the elaborate, complex style where the sentences were so long and so involved that sheer astonishment when they came to an end made audiences cheer enthusiastically.

"And when I am told that England is on the down grade, that life is becoming less honest and pure, that religion is losing its hold, and the code of morals no longer being respected, then I ask those who make the assertions to come down here to this beautiful country which I venture to call the flower garden of Great Britain, and pointing to your women and your men—and no finer specimens of Nature's handiwork are to be found on this earth; the poet might have had them in his mind when he wrote—" And so on.

Sometimes, in the villages, we were received with a blank surprise which continued as we told them the world was watching eagerly the way they would vote on Tuesday week, that from the Czar of all the Russias to the newest born child in Germany, the Continent awaited the result with anxiety and fear; I think not until we had whirled away did they begin to consider all this, and to make endeavour to realise what it meant. The contest missed the compactness of a London fight. Even Len, confident as he was, became influenced by this fact for a time, but entry into a town of some importance where his portrait (taken six years before and giving him an appearance of youth and great amiability) appeared in shop windows, and children ran up to follow the carriage, and a long line of men stood outside the Town Hall, and sandwich men went along at the edge of the pavement with

"TEN REASONS WHY

YOU SHOULD

VOTE FOR DREW"

matched on the other side by boards which professed to give fifteen reasons why you should do nothing of the sort—all this revived Len, and the visit over, he declared he had no

doubt concerning the result ; the only question to be discussed with Beecher was the amount of the majority. Beecher, a local man, prided himself on being able to take the gloomiest possible views ; he had prophesied to the late member a victory by two hundred votes, and the figures showed an excess of over two thousand ; in the present case he placed his estimate rather higher. Beecher had wisdom, and he was the first to reprove my brother for making reference to an Oxford incident in the life of the man on the other side ; the opponent did, in fact, take exception to the allusion, and news came that having been reminded of the fact that he once fought without gloves, he proposed now to repeat the experiment with, he hoped, greater success.

"What did I tell you ?" demanded Beecher, triumphantly.

"I'd like to know exactly what is meant."

"What it means is, Mr Drew, that your past will now be put under a microscope. You know best whether it will stand it."

"Dismal croaker !" cried Len. "Henry, come and tackle him. Let me watch the contest. Optimist versus Pessimist."

"He's one in a thousand," remarked Beecher to me afterwards, confidentially, "if there isn't a spot or two somewhere."

I reassured him.

"Funny thing about you two," went on Beecher, thoughtfully. "I've got a brother, he's a farmer and a lay preacher, ten children, and everyone's got a good opinion of him but me. I loathe and hate the very thought of the man. If I could do him an injury, I would. If he could do me any harm, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment. Whatever I hear to his credit, I don't believe ; anything he hears against me he swallows without hesitation. They say there's no friend like a brother, but until I met you, Mr Drew, I never realised it, and that's the truth !"

The proper messages of encouragement came from leaders of the party ; a few notable men arrived to speak for us, and were duly warned to lay special stress on the high

character and white repute of the candidate. Deputations from societies with titles beginning with anti were received, and, so far as possible, mollified. Management of the posters took me back to early days, and I wrote one evening a long letter to Mrs Latham, in addition to the nightly communication that went to St Donatt's Road asked at the end of the letter whether any news had come from Kitty. The two envelopes had just dropped into the pillar-box opposite the hotel when my brother came running up the narrow High Street, hat at the back of head, coat tails flying, face scarlet with excitement. Some stragglers followed in the hope of discovering interest.

"Want you!" he panted. "Come inside at once. Don't stand there like a fool!"

We went upstairs to the rooms which had been reserved for us.

"She's here!" he exclaimed, closing the door sharply. "She's here in this town. You must get her away at once and keep her away until it's all over!"

"Why not let her remain?"

"Will you do what I tell you to do? Pull yourself together, and help me for once. Go round to her and get her out of the town. It doesn't matter where you go, so long as you get her away, and keep her quiet!"

"Will she consent to come?"

"She will if you behave tactfully."

"I'll do it, then, Len," I answered, "but I really don't see what objection there is to her presence. The other man drives about with his wife, and she apparently helps him a good deal in canvassing."

"I'm speaking of Kitty Latham."

"Oh!" And, after a pause, "Perhaps she only wants to help you."

"I know the type of woman better than you do. She's staying at the Unicorn; go and see her and get away by the 9.12. We can do quite well without you here."

"Milly might not like to hear of it."

"Milly need not have a chance of hearing of it!"

I was forced to pretend to be seriously indisposed, and Kitty—grown rather stouter and more matronly, and certainly a handsome woman—gave me her sympathy at once. She had, it appeared, come in the hope of seeing me rather than in a desire to encounter Len, and when I said I wanted to go away at once to the sea-side and obtain rest and good air, she declared that I must accompany her to the boarding-house where she had been living for two summers. As we went in the train, I saw that Len, with a relieved air, watched us through the railings of the embankment.

"We'll soon put you right," said Kitty, in a motherly way that made me ashamed of the deceit. "You must take everything very quietly for a few weeks."

"A few days," I amended. "Want to get back in town on Tuesday night."

"Wish you could stay longer. You will scarcely have time to become friendly with my baby."

"Your baby, Kitty?" I echoed, amazedly.

"Oh, you didn't know."

"I'm so glad," I declared. "Tell me what your name is now."

"I am Mrs Thomas," she answered, looking out of the window.

"And shall I have the pleasure of meeting baby's father?"

"If you don't mind we won't talk about him. But you needn't look at me pityingly. I have the dearest little boy there ever was in this world, and I don't need anyone's sympathy."

Near the Parade the very first morning (which was Saturday) the young man and I became such good friends that he permitted me to take him from his nurse and his white perambulator, and on the beach I instructed him in the game of throwing pebbles at the waves. His aim was, at first, erratic, and he showed such acute distress when accused of being a girl, that we had to give up criticism; when later a stone hit me, he clambered up on my lap and remedied the



hurt by kissing the place. I made a fleet of steamers out of the morning paper, and suggested he should be called Admiral, but the title presented some difficulties and we borrowed the title of General from another branch of the services. He was a jolly little chap, with strong limbs and fair hair, and I do believe he felt honestly gratified to have a companion who treated him as though he were a mature lad of ten ; at the boarding-house, ladies fussed over him, calling him a sweet ickle mite, and a dimpled ickled darling, paying no regard to the frown with which he received the compliments. His mother came along at eleven o'clock, admirably gowned, and watched by youths in panama hats and white flannels with undisguised approval ; I could not help thinking that a few years ago she would have returned many of these glances. I reminded her when her baby had taken her over the Channel Squadron, of the evening when she tried to induce me to kiss her.

"Please !" she said, appealingly. "You don't mean it should hurt me, but it does. I like to think that my life began when this little chap arrived."

"Has Mrs Latham seen him yet ?"

"No," answered Kitty, "no. There's a reason for that. I should like her to see him, I should like everybody to see him. Excepting Len."

"Thought you said you had no grievance against him."

"Are there any children there ?" she asked.

I shook my head, and she rose, suggesting a long walk, but one not longer than I could endure. The baby, however, refused to part company with me, and we had to accommodate our pace to his little steps ; his satisfaction when I affected to be unable to move at anything like his speed was unbounded. It occurred to me when we rested near one of the old Martello Towers, that Kitty was right in numbering herself among the happy women. She asked about Milly, and my news delighted her.

On the Tuesday evening we made a large party, Kitty, the nurse, baby, and I, engaging a compartment in the late train to

town. Kitty wanted to see her dressmaker next day, the nurse wished to see a friend at Knightsbridge Barracks, the baby desired to meet the lions at the Zoo, I was anxious to ascertain at the earliest moment the result of the election. Baby went to sleep on the way, to dream, probably, of wild animals, went to sleep on my lap, and it was considered unwise to disturb him. Consequently, on arriving at the London terminus, I was allowed to carry the little chap to the fore-wheeler, and Mr Fowler, on late duty, remarking jokingly that I looked quite the family man, ordered some of his porters to assist with the luggage. Near St James's Street we stopped the cab, and I ran up the steps to see if the figures had come in; one of the long sheets of paper was being detached from the instrument.

"Must be some mistake," I declared, returning to the four-wheeler. "It isn't possible that he is beaten by eight hundred votes. Can't think what it means!"

"It means," said Kitty, "that others estimate him more correctly than I did, more correctly than you do."

"Then they are wrong!" I asserted, emphatically.

In reply to the pre-paid telegram I sent the first thing in the morning, he wired, "Better luck next time. Thousand thanks for your kindness." That was so like Len, to over-pay me for small services.

## CHAPTER XXII

### LEN WITHDRAWS HIS SUIT

STEMSON took me into partnership in October of the following year. I had so little of the dash and courage which Len possessed, that I anticipated drawbacks in giving up the fixed and adequate income for a share in profits, and it was not until we had done six months under the new arrangement that I felt justified in asking Milly and my mother to look out for a house that would suit. It became necessary later to give more detailed instructions, for my mother was fascinated by an announcement in a house-agent's list of an admirable dwelling in a refined neighbourhood, and declared this was—short of the house at Blackheath with Len—just what she had dreamed of; on obtaining an order to view, we found it was a house next door to the one in which we had been living for some years in Shardeloes Road. Mrs Fowler, on the other hand, drew my attention to something like a baronial castle at Lewisham (built either by some old gentleman at a time when softening of the brain had set in, or by some young sportsman to win a bet), pointing out the considerable attraction of two stone lions over the entrance gate about to play a game of bowls, and to several pine-apples of the same material with which the outer walls were studded. I found the architect had been so far carried away by a desire for realism, as to make sparing use of drain-pipes; Milly's mother said that people who were so particular had better choose for themselves. Delay occurred in the superannuation of Mr Fowler, and Milly remarked there was no occasion for us to hurry into the first house we came across; she did not wish to leave her people until they departed from London. Milly soothed me by describing

fancifully the neck and neck race between myself and Len for the house at Blackheath, offering to back me to the extent of sixpence. I said it would be a shame to win her money, but took the wager, and Mrs Latham on whom we sometimes called and who on these occasions made elaborate excuses for leaving us alone, asked to be allowed to put a shilling on the same horse. Mrs Latham enjoyed life a good deal at this period by the device of calling on institutions and asylums around London, consulting the secretary, inspecting the buildings, and talking to inmates, leaving with a gracious word and genial smiles that made all the officials experience a keen sensation of hopefulness. The two lady lodgers at my mother's secured, without any warning, two buyers in a City warehouse, encountered by chance at a Handel Festival at the Crystal Palace, and married them promptly; I was at a loss to see what could be done for my mother until I thought of Mrs Croucher, who still lived near to the shop in Woodpecker Road.

"I can manage her if anyone can," said Mrs Croucher, with a great air of artfulness. "It's all a question of tact. Tact is a thing that's served out awk'ardly; some people haven't got none, and some of us have more than our share. You mark my words: we shall be as 'appy and contented as the days are long!"

The scheme did not work well at first, for Mrs Croucher's idea of diplomacy was to agree with everything, whereas a certain amount of opposition and argument proved as necessary to my mother as sugar in her tea; the plan went more smoothly when I arranged for Milly to give the companion a word of advice, and thereafter they quarrelled on excellent terms. It was one of Milly's tasks to look in now and again, and if she found some contentious topic in existence, to hear both sides and reserve her decision; in its absence, it became her duty to adroitly set the two ladies at logger-heads before bringing her call to a close. Milly told me one evening that her father had met my brother over some question of a ticket; Mr Fowler, it appeared,



advised her privately to see less of me. We agreed there could be no reason for this, and I declared my intention of communicating with Mr Fowler on the subject, but Milly assured me the advice would have no effect upon her, and no need existed for taking any action. Len, it seemed, had been in the habit of running down to some small station in the country.

"On business," I suggested. "His work takes him nearly everywhere."

And the travelling collectors asserted that he frequently took a return ticket for a short distance, giving the lad at the destination his evening journal and the word "Season!" Coming back he chatted with the young official, who seemed to have gained the impression that Len was a director, and, arriving at the London terminus, delivered the second half of his short return ticket. I remarked that to a man whose mind was occupied with many affairs such a blunder might well occur, and the circumstance that Mr Fowler had been able to arrange for no proceedings to be taken, meant the affair did not possess a serious character.

Next thing we heard about Len was that he and his wife had separated. My mother and I agreed that if two people found they could not get along well together, this solution was inevitable; it seemed likely to us that Len might now find his progress less retarded by impediments. My mother, after several debates, decided that the incident, regrettable as it would appear to many, in reality took a load of apprehension from her shoulders; she had feared all along that in the house at Blackheath she and Mrs Len might fail to hit it off; under the new arrangement there would be only one head of the household.

"And that'll be me," she remarked, joyfully. "I shall be able to order all the servants about, look after Len's meals, tell the gardeners what they ought to do, dictate to the nurse—I suppose that won't happen, though. It's what I'd particularly looked forward to. I've got my own ideas

about bringing children up, Henry. You've never had anything to do with babies."

I nearly told her about Kitty's little chap.

"But there's a right way and a wrong way, and it's many years since I had a chance of looking after one."

"The right way is your way, and the wrong way is other people's way."

"That's exactly it," she remarked, seriously, "and I consider it quite clever of you, Henry, to be able to see the matter in that light. You'll never be the man Len is, but I'm bound to say I see considerable improvements. At one time I began to despair of ever making anything of you. One clever boy in a family of two is more than the average, and if you'd turned out a Simple Simon, I shouldn't have had any excuse for grumbling."

"Len will be feeling lonely," I remarked. "We ought to do something to cheer him up."

"Shall I make him a nice blue mangle? He used to be very partial to them when he was a boy."

"We'll have a swell dinner in town, mother," I decided. "Just the three of us. As good a dinner as London can give."

"That means," she said, "that I shall have to see about a new lace cap. Now the question is, what about the ribbons? Pale blue or dark blue?"

Len replied in jocular strain to my note, protesting that he had acted in the interests of economy in agreeing to the separation. In regard to the evening at the Carlton, he had unfortunately a previous engagement to dine at Lockhart's Cocoa-rooms, at the corner of Long Acre, and assuming the cost of the proposed meal to be two guineas, he was clearly entitled to the amount; a postal-order could be forwarded by return. In the same spirit, I sent the remittance together with a shilling in stamps, representing the tip I should have had to give to the waiter for attending upon him. Acknowledging this, he promised to give me a call at Queen Street, so soon as he found

himself free from some knotted ropes which were hampering his movements.

"I have devoted your money," his letter added, "to the relief of a gentleman in reduced circumstances."

I pointed out to young Farrington (who had become my confidential clerk) that here was a good answer to those who charged my brother with meanness. My only fear was lest generosity should interfere with prompt arrival at the goal which he had set for himself.

Mrs Latham, after a burst of excellent health and great industry, died. Died, and a letter from her solicitors announced that the whole of her money had been left to me. Kitty came up for the funeral, and when my Aunt Mabel had taken her black-coated men away, we had a long talk. I said the fortune should have gone to her; Kitty retorted she had plenty; besides, she had no claim on her step-mother apart from that which consisted in having given her cause for a good amount of worry. As to the baby boy she did not propose to allow anyone to interfere with her rights and her duties, and on this point spoke warmly and with decision. She hoped I had kept my promise to say nothing about his existence.

"What you can do now is to take the house at Blackheath," she said, masterfully. "Marry, and settle down there. It will gratify your mother, and every son ought to be glad of the opportunity of doing that."

"But Len will think I have stolen a march on him!"

"Does it matter?" she cried, vehemently. "What Len will think is the bogey that is always bobbing up in front of you! Len has never thought of other people; why should you bother to think of him? Try to put him out of your mind altogether."

"That would not be easy."

"It was not easy for me, but I found it possible. I caught sight of him the other day, and it didn't make any difference."

"You have your boy."

"Yes," she said, happily, "I have my boy!"

The man at the house in Vanbrugh Park was on the Stock Exchange, and I found he had been doing badly. Tiller, our inquiry agent, reported this, reported also that the man was desirous of moving into a house more appropriate to his reduced income. Milly—delighted with the news and declaring that poor Mrs Latham surely intended her money to be used in this manner—suggested it should all at present be kept a secret from my mother, and we went about the preparations with the relish that conspirators experience. Everything was proceeding well, when Mr Fowler came to Queen Street one afternoon and made a statement to me of such gravity that I ordered him, in imperative tones, to remain in my room until Farrington took hansom, discovered my brother, and brought him to us.

"Felt it my duty to tell you," urged Mr Fowler.

"Sit down!" I said, sharply.

"Milly, you see, is our only girl. And although her mother and me know quite well that it's a fine match for her——"

"Please stop!" I ordered. "I want to hear nothing more until my brother comes."

"You needn't think," said Mr Fowler, with spirit, "that I've any objection to facing him. Never made a statement yet without being sure of my ground!"

Feeling certain all would be explained so soon as Len arrived, it was impossible to evade perturbation of mind, and I found it difficult to do anything but pace up and down the room. Once before, I had nearly lost Milly; if anything came between us now, the future would lose all its colour for me. In less than an hour Farrington returned, bringing Len with him; withdrew, and left the three of us alone. Mr Fowler doggedly repeated the statement.

"My dear sir," cried my brother, trying to balance a ruler on his finger-tip, "you railway men are the most muddle-headed set of people I ever came across. You gain pro-



motion, I suppose, on the grounds of special stupidity. I certainly had some conversation with you on the occasion referred to, but if you told me you had seen Henry with a lady and a child, I'm perfectly sure I made no such suggestions as you ask us to believe."

"Mean to contradict all that you said, then?"

"No, no!" retorted Len, airily. "I'm saying now exactly what I said then. I'm the last person to circulate scandal, and if I did, my brother is the last person of whom I should say it."

"Then I'm done!" admitted Mr Fowler, rising. "It's my word against yours. Good day, Henry, and I hope you'll forgive me for interfering; glad I came to you before mentioning it to anyone else. 'Tisn't often I put my foot in the fire, and when I do, I like to draw it out soon as ever I can."

"Felt sure," speaking to him on the landing, "perfectly certain, Mr Fowler, that my brother would be able to put everything right."

"He's got the trick of putting himself right."

"That's what I mean. Do you want a cab, Mr Fowler?"

Tickled with the idea his good humour returned. He went down, waving his hand and shouting renewed apologies.

"Better look at the numbers," said Len, as returning I took up my cheque-book and placed it in the safe. "What a suspicious mind you have. I don't pretend to be all white, but it's pretty hard when one's own brother refuses to believe——"

I declared that I had always accepted his word.

"No!" he declared, obstinately. "I know that is not the case, and I know that you know it is not the case. A kind of distrust has been steadily growing up between us for some years. There's no use in blinking the facts. I am no more to you than a dozen, twenty, a hundred other men whom you meet in the course of business."

"Len," almost furiously, "this is most unkind and unfair.

There never has been a time when I haven't been prepared to make almost any sacrifice for your sake."

"Almost!" he repeated. "A useful word. I heard a man in Hyde Park the other evening, when I was wasting a couple of hours there, give his opinion that the Prime Minister was the greatest blackguard, the most notorious criminal, the most depraved scoundrel the world had ever produced. 'In a manner of speaking,' he added. You adopt the same methods with your 'almost.' I'm tired," he burst out, "of a man who is almost a brother, almost a friend. Give me, for preference, a man who is completely my enemy. I can deal with him. I know what I'm about when he declares war against me. I can fight as well as any, once I recognise the position of the other man."

Words did not come, and I could only look at him appealingly across the table.

"You're not the only one," he continued. "May I smoke here?" I pushed the cigarette-case eagerly in his direction, and struck a match for his use. "I was prepared to find it in many quarters when I lost that contest. Knew I should be dropped at head-quarters. Knew the papers on my side would explain away the result by saying the selection of the candidate was perhaps unfortunate. Knew I had used up the last ounce of influence, and that I should not have had the chance but for a fluke that occurred just before my name cropped up. Knew I had been neglecting my own business for some time, and that unless I succeeded in getting into the House, I should find trouble in making up for lost time. Knew my wife would, at the first suggestion of my friendship with some one else in the country, clutch at the excuse for getting rid of me, and I knew this would shut a good many doors. But I did think I could reckon on my brother to stick by me."

"You can, Len!"

"Takes some time to get up the ladder," he went on, "although I was supposed to be one who climbed quickly,

but, Lord, the swiftness of the return journey!" He held up the paper-weight and allowed it to drop noisily on the table. Young Farrington opened the door; I intimated with a gesture that his presence was not required. "Seen that fellow somewhere before," remarked Len, sharply.

I gave some information, glad enough to welcome a new subject.

"And what are you paying him now? Too much!" asserted my brother on hearing the sum. "For a man of his age, a hundred and fifty would be adequate."

"I like to pay," deferentially, "according to the quality of work, rather than the quantity of years."

"When I employed clerks, I never made the blunder of giving them more than the market price."

"You talk as though this were all past and done. By-the-bye, Len, I want to ask you something. You remember the old house at Blackheath?"

"It's further away now than it ever has been."

I told him what had happened; he eyed me steadily as I spoke.

"So the little man is going to do it, is he?" he remarked, thoughtfully. "Not the elder brother who was getting on so well at one time, and whose name is absent now from the newspapers, but Master Henry, five feet six high, about ten stone in weight; he's the one who is going to take his mother back to the house in which both the sons were born. A queer world, but it has to go on juggling and balancing, and to keep some down it sends others up. Do you know," he went on, resting elbows, "it would be an enormous relief to me to strike you!"

"One way," I said, amusedly, "of getting your name in the journals again. 'Fracas in a City office.' Perhaps it would not be worth doing though."

He continued to gaze at me curiously. "I suppose not," he answered, with deliberation. "Daresay you're right. Besides, at the finish, I might feel tempted to kick,

and—" He lifted one foot and showed the sole of his boot.

"My dear Len, you don't mean that you are walking about on a sloppy day with soles like that. Why didn't you put on another pair?"

"Hadn't another pair."

"Why don't you have these mended then?"

"From inquiries made in several quarters, I find that three shillings and sixpence is the amount required and," he felt in his waistcoat pockets, "eightpence halfpenny is the total sum in my possession at the present moment."

"Why not write a cheque and——"

He raved up and down the room, swearing furiously; I could do nothing but interject a soothing word.

"Dare refer to that again," he screamed, shaking his fist. "No doubt it's a great joy to you to jump on a man when he's down, but if you don't make up your mind to deprive yourself of the satisfaction, I won't answer for the consequences. Do you understand? Do you see that I'm in earnest, or must I prove it to you in some other way?"

"You're worried," I urged. "Sit down and keep quiet for a few minutes. Sit down at once," more commandingly. "I'm not going to listen to you unless you talk sanely. Come in!" Answering a knock at the door.

Tiller entered with some information concerning a special inquiry into the reliability of a new customer; I told him he could speak in the presence of my visitor, and the business took about a quarter of an hour. Tiller, in finishing, conveyed by signs a wish to speak to me outside, and with a word of apology, I followed him out. Tiller asked whether I knew anything of the man in the room; I answered sharply. "Then that's all right," said Tiller, reluctantly. "Only I think you ought to know, sir, he goes about bragging that you're his brother!"

Len had recovered calm, and seemed prepared now to talk quietly, to attend to what I had to say. If it were true he was so hard up that he could not afford to have his boots



repaired (looking at him more closely I perceived his clothes were shabby) then clearly something must be done, and conversation in reasonable tones would help to find a way. But no raving could be allowed, and he would have to make an endeavour to be fair to me, just to anyone else who cared to help.

"I must practise it," he conceded. "Are there any classes held where one can acquire the beggar's whine, in a set of lessons, ten and six till perfect?"

That again was not the way to talk. Nobody wanted him to adopt the manner of match-vendors; he could retain his self-esteem and all that folk expected was a proper civility. Had he anything to suggest?

"Better give me a berth in your office?"

We happened to be fully-staffed, with the result that no one was working overtime; this some of the married clerks regretted.

"Sack one of them," he recommended. "Get rid of that chap Farrington, and put me in his place. Two twenty will just about keep my head above water. I can go through the Bankruptcy Court and start afresh!" A moment of hesitation on my part caused him to break out again: I stopped him authoritatively.

"We'll give you something to do," I announced, "but we shall not get rid of anybody to make a vacancy. You can come here under your own name, or you can adopt another, if you like. Please yourself!"

"Call me Mr Leonard."

"Very well," thankful the interview was nearly over. "Consider it a temporary arrangement, and I'll pay you five guineas a week."

"I suppose," he remarked, going, "that I ought to thank you, but, to be honest, I don't feel inclined to do so."

"Then be honest, dear chap," I answered, cheerfully, "and let's both begin again with a better understanding of each other. Besides, there need never be any question of thanks between you and me."

I wrote to Kitty and told her of all this; she replied, asking me to suggest a method by which she, too, could help without allowing anyone but myself to become acquainted with the fact. The baby boy was well and healthy and bonny; had begun to make large experiments with the English language, and could identify my portrait, giving to it the nearest equivalent possible to the name of Uncle. Entrusted for the first time with a pen, he had made at the foot of the note-paper some remarks which Kitty said conveyed his message of love to me.

In my rooms at Tavistock Place I managed to find the suit of clothes which Len had once given to me, and he accepted the return of the garments with words of gratitude which, I do declare, pained me more than the remarks he used across the table in Queen Street.

It had come so much a matter of course to think of Len as one enjoying perfect health, that I could scarcely believe the contents of a letter marked "personal" which I found one morning at office. It had been dashed off in a great hurry, the last lines went at an angle; the tenour was that, suffering from a breakdown in health, he resolved to go at once into a Nursing Home in the West End. An expensive place, but it seemed to him that at such a crisis of one's life, the question of money ought not to be considered. A few weeks retirement from the world, and he would be himself again. I read this, in a dazed way, two or three times, then started up, determined to see him and give every help in my power; in re-folding the letter I found on the back page two lines, which said—

"You must send me £75 before half-past ten in the morning."

And this (which was exactly what I wanted to do) oddly enough, made me pause. Len might not, in his present state, act wisely, or with his usual discretion; the better plan would be to take charge of all the arrangements, and relieve him of the worry that details involved. A message to a friend of mine, carrying on a City practice in an office

of one of the large buildings near, brought reliable particulars, and a telegram despatched to Len gave the address and recommended him to proceed there without delay, leaving everything else to me. I telephoned to the Nursing Home and arranged they should have everything in readiness to receive him. This would have been followed by a swift visit in a taxi-cab, but at the moment callers came, demanding to see me, and no one but me; the order concerned the issue of some company prospectuses. (A very lucrative business, by-the-bye; suggested by me to the firm and sanctioned with the provision that I should attend to the branch myself, and make sure—as Stemson said—that we became mixed up in nothing shady. I should not like to be certain that we always evaded dealing with doubtful folk, but I do know that we were careful never to make a bad debt.) Afternoon came before I was able to get along to Wimpole Street.

“We’ve been expecting him,” replied the matron, “but he has not arrived yet. Perhaps he’s too ill to be moved.”

Greatly disturbed, I hurried to the address on the south side of the river given in Len’s communication. Something Mansions was the name of the place, and it occurred to me in going up the stone staircase that they were not easily distinguishable from workmen’s dwellings. No answer could be obtained to the knocking at the door, but a stout woman came from the next apartments in the same corridor with lips firmly set in the manner of one determined to give no information.

“Gone!” she said, curtly. “No, I don’t know where to. And if I did, I shouldn’t tell you. I can keep my mouth shut as well as anybody. Yes, he went away just before eleven, if you must know. There’s been a lot of other callers, and, like you, they didn’t seem inclined to take ‘No’ for an answer. There’s nothing else I can tell you. He’s gone and he won’t be back for three or four weeks. Obligated to go, he was; couldn’t remain here another minute. His brother, are you? Well, all I can say is, I don’t see much

resemblance, except perhaps the nose and eyes. Couldn't tell you which way he turned when he got outside. Did try to, but these windows are so awkward. Well, what he told me, in strict confidence, and I've no business to be repeating it to you, was that he had to go into a Nursing 'Ome somewhere. It's no use you keeping on asking fifty thousand questions, because he paid me to keep quiet, and quiet I'm going to keep."

I paid her to relax her methods of reserve, and it eventually seemed clear that she told me all she knew, but this did not amount to much. To our man Tiller I gave the task of going around to every Home of the kind in London given in Kelly's Directory ; the conclusion we had to come to was that Len had entered under a name not his own, and I had the gloomy assurance that he would be without a friend, would be labouring under a sense of grievance against me.

Until a month later, a telegram came from the Metropolitan Hospital in Kingsland Road, and I hastened there, relieved to think suspense was over ; delighted to know I was going to see him again. I ran up the steps, resenting the inquiry of the porter, walked impatiently up and down the passage whilst inquiries were being made. The matron came, and gave me a few distinct, good-natured words of advice. Len was already improving, but his condition still appeared serious ; the matron thought that if the best happened there would be a long period of convalescence. Indeed, so far as she could gather from the doctors, he ought, if circumstances permitted, to live in some suitable place abroad.

"For a time?"

"For the rest of his life," answered the matron.

He was asleep as I tip-toed along the ward, to the bed indicated by the sister in charge. He had shaven his moustache, and his hair was becoming thin, but looking at him, I could see the same Len who, as a boy, always slept with his right arm for pillow. A catch in his breathing was noticeable ; the touch of colour on his cheeks appeared to be not quite in the right place.



"Hullo!" he said, opening his eyes slowly and rubbing them. "Come at last, then?"

"I expected you to go to the Nursing Home, Len."

He smiled. "Don't blame you," he said. "You see, as a matter of fact, that was all bunkum. London was getting too warm and I had to fly away, just as the swallows do when it is getting too cold."

"Mother has been worried about you."

"They turned me out of the village in Hertfordshire, partly because I couldn't pay, partly because of something else. I had to tramp all the way back to London. That's how I caught this damn cold. It's nothing more than a cold, but it's just about sewn me up. Let me have some money before you go."

"You don't need any whilst you're here, Len. When you're ready to go out, I'll see what can be done."

He gazed up at me in a queer way before speaking again. "Better be civil to you, I suppose," he remarked. "The time will come when I shall be the upper dog again."

"Of course, it will, old chap."

"I'm not the kind of man who being knocked down stays down."

"Certain of that. Only—" I hesitated, "if you had been straightforward with me, perhaps I could have helped you."

One hand played with the counterpane. "That's such a dull way of conducting one's life," he said. "Any fool can take the main road. I like to get to my destination by short cuts."

## CHAPTER XXIII

### LEN AND THE HOUSE AT BLACKHEATH

MILLY took charge of the arrangements, assuring me that if I did but abstain from interfering, all would go well; at the dramatic moment I might be called in to confirm a statement and to make the end of the scene effective, but until then all she needed was a free hand. The dear girl brought such relish, and prided herself so greatly on her powers as stage manager, that one could not help feeling sorry when she had to announce that my aid was urgently needed; the leading lady declined to go on. My mother, it appeared, had a keen anxiety to see the house in Vanbrugh Park, wanted to go over the rooms just once to ascertain whether anything had been altered, desired to walk through the nursery garden and find out what had happened to the fruit trees; admitted the thought of all this had never, in many, many years, been entirely absent from her mind. But Len, in one of his youthful bursts of ambition, had made her promise that she never would set eyes on the place until the time came when he would be there to receive her, and this promise she had studiously kept; this promise she always meant to keep.

"If you can't suggest anything," Milly declared, "it means there is nothing to suggest. Unless——"

"Go on, young woman."

"Unless we give up the idea of making a play of it, and tell her the truth. Tell her that you have taken the house on the long remainder of a lease, and that everything is ready."

"She may still object to come, and in that case, all the motives for taking the house disappear. Seems to me, there's only one way out."

"One is plenty."

I explained the situation clearly to my brother at office (where he was doing better than we had expected, keeping on fairly good terms with all the other clerks, excepting Farrington, who alone amongst them was aware of his relationship to me), and Len, very good-naturedly, agreed to help in any manner I liked to propose. Living in one room in the house at Osnaburgh Street, where he had started life after leaving home, he made it a provision that if he gave the assurance I required, he would be permitted to remain at Blackheath, and indeed this seemed a wise and a feasible arrangement: I gained the idea that he required close supervision at this junction of his life, and my duty was to give it to the best of my ability. I wrote to his wife asking her to help in the task: the reply proved clearly that she was unworthy of Len, and the assertion that he had spoilt her life seemed to me proof that she had not yet become free from hysteria. The popular hobby of bringing vague charges against my brother was one to be increasingly resented.

"You don't mean it?" cried my mother. "You can't be serious, Henry? One of your boyish jokes made up on a Saturday, just to have a laugh at me."

"This very afternoon!" I said, decisively. "Run upstairs and get ready and ask Mrs Croucher to come with us."

"Ask her?" she echoed, with dignity. "I shall order her to come with us. Do we go by train, or must we walk all the way?"

"An open carriage is waiting out in Lewisham High Road."

"Let it drive up to the door," she directed, "and we'll make it wait there until all the neighbours have had a good look."

To please her and to gratify Mrs Croucher we went down Clifton Hill into Woodpecker Road where my mother gave gracious bows to those who recognised us; Milly and I assured her the general shop looked a perfect disgrace to the

neighbourhood, with posters calling attention, in terms and with illustrations, unworthy of such an establishment. She sat upright, as the carriage returned and made its way more directly to our destination, supplying incident by reproving Mrs Croucher for a bonnet awry, for the wearing of the grin, for exposing an elastic-side boot to our gaze, for playing with the carriage handle, for looking about her, until that excellent person, as we drove by the Obelisk at Lewisham, became a picture of profound misery, incurring new reprimands for giving a sigh at a time when cheerfulness and gaiety should be exhibited. Near Blackheath village, my mother became more agitated, smoothing the brown muff which Milly had given to her, in a restless way.

"I see alteration, my dears," she remarked, speaking to us, but shaking her head severely in the direction of poor Mrs Croucher, to indicate the person responsible. "New names over shops; fresh buildings about; lot of strangers walking up and down. It's to be hoped they've left the Heath alone."

"Last time I was there, on a Bank Holiday," remarked Mrs Croucher, with respect, "I couldn't see no change whatsoever."

"You wouldn't," retorted my mother. "Hold your umbrella properly, do. You nurse it as though it was a new baby."

"I shan't forget," said the other, reminiscently, "the trouble I had with my third. When the nurse stepped foot inside the room, the first thing she said was, 'Mrs Croucher, you can say what you like, but you'll never get over it!'"

"Will you kindly oblige me," begged my mother, "by remembering that there are unmarried people present? Wonder how often I've had to tell you not to talk so much about your own affairs."

Mrs Croucher expressed a vague wish that she had as many sovereigns.

"You don't get money by wishing for it," remarked my mother. "My Len hasn't made his fortune by lolling all side-ways in a carriage, and gazing up at the sky in an idiotic



way. Look in front of you, do, and try to realise that this is the day of your life. Wish now I hadn't brought you with me. You're more trouble and more responsibility than Henry and Milly put together!"

There came better justification for the presence of the lady companion when, skirting Blackheath, my mother pointed out proudly the church where she and my father were married, and Mrs Croucher said it possessed a nice spire; my mother, as guide, drew attention to the walk where the nurse had taken me daily, and Mrs Croucher remarked that it looked healthy; my mother gave the direction of Woolwich, and Mrs Croucher declared there must be great comfort and encouragement in living within a few miles of military barracks, especially in view of the fact that nowadays you never knew what the German Emperor might do next. On venturing to suggest that the command of domestic servants was possibly made difficult by nearness of the Royal Artillery, she received the crushing answer that they were not all like her. Conversation was thereafter given to us, and Milly and I—for whom this had been a favourite evening promenade—affected ignorance, and I was appealed to with an urgent request that I should throw my memory back over the long intervening years since childhood. Outside the house I jumped down and opened the gates; the coachman drove half-way round the semi-circle to the steps. There Len waited, both hands out to welcome us. My mother ran from me to his arms.

"You dear, wonderful boy!" she sobbed. "If I could only tell you how happy I am. This is what I've been looking forward to for such a long time. Your poor father ought to be here, Len!"

"He knows, mother, he knows. Miss Fowler, how do you do? Very pleased to welcome you. I shall want your advice here; we men have no taste. If you don't like the wall-papers—Hullo, little man! Scarcely noticed you! Now, mother dear, a cup of tea first, out on the lawn."

"He's thought of everything," said my mother, gratefully.

"Mrs Croucher, when you've done staring about like a great owl, perhaps you'll help me off with my cloak. No, Milly; let her do it!"

The maids had followed my instructions carefully, and the old silver teapot presented to me when I left home, was set on the white cloth'd table; a cake as near to the kind my mother used to manufacture was there, a scent of buttered toast made Mrs Croucher sniff appreciatively. As Len poured out and begged us to make ourselves at home, we had to interfere on behalf of the lady companion, and for compromise she was allowed to remain, but to take her chair two yards away, so that no one should credit her with the honour of being a member of the family. "And don't lick your fingers," ordered my mother, sharply. "Watch us, and do as we do!"

"Two lumps, mother, I think?" said Len.

"He remembers," she commented.

"What gratifies me very much," he went on, "is to observe that they have not cut down any of the trees. If I had found a single one missing, I should have felt much inclined to tear up the agreement, and refuse to have anything further to do with the matter."

"You must have taken a lot of trouble, my dear. However did you manage about furnishing?"

"There," he answered, with a wave of the hand, "there the little man came in useful. The place would not have been ready but for his help."

"I'm sure," she declared, "Henry was only too pleased to be allowed to give assistance. It isn't much he can do."

"I shall want him to do more," explained Len, sipping at his cup. "We've talked the matter over together, and we have had to realise the fact that owing to differences of opinion between myself and my unfortunate wife——"

"She was no use," decided my mother. "No more use than that twig on the grass. Mrs Croucher, take it up and throw it away in the corner. If you can't be ornamental, you may as well be useful!"

"What I suggest is this," Len continued. "We want to live under pleasant conditions and to make up a comfortable circle. I'm pretty busy in the City, as Henry will tell you; my time will be fully occupied and sometimes I may have to stay in town all night. What I recommend is that he shall take up the position of master of the house; that this charming young lady," with a bow to Milly that I think she might have acknowledged, "shall on her marriage become mistress of the house, and you, dear mother, and I, regard ourselves as their guests. Now, think that over whilst you're having your second cup of tea, and then we'll go in and I'll show you through all the rooms."

"You're the best son, Len," she cried, delightedly, "that any mother ever had. I've said so before, and I shall always continue to say so!"

"Your praise," he replied, kissing her hand, "is very precious to me!"

Milly had, of course, seen the rooms; had taken charge of nearly every improvement in connection with them, but she very adroitly gave expressions of satisfaction as each door was opened by Len. It was a long performance, for my mother insisted on trying every chair and every settee, looked at her reflection in every mirror, gave announcement of satisfaction with the few chosen pictures. The drawing-room, she ventured to remark, looked rather empty; in her day, one could scarcely walk from one end to the other without upsetting several articles of furniture, and she missed the large oval table which at that time, had proved so useful for the display of books, but when Mrs Croucher supported the resolution which hinted at a preference for old methods, then it was immediately declared that although some could not move with the times, others did so, and the charge of being old fashioned was one which should not be lightly incurred.

"Now this is your own room," announced Len, "and here, I think, mother, you will at last find something to which you can give unstinted praise."

"I like it all, my dear."

"My desire has been," he went on, opening the door, "to procure as nearly as possible the same furniture, occupying the same positions, and you can sit here and fancy yourself young again."

"I shan't do that," said my mother, gazing around dreamily, "I shall sit here and think about you! Henry," turning to me, "try to remember this all your days. Try to tell your brother now what is in my mind. Try to make him understand how grateful we are, and how proud we are——"

She broke down. Len and I, leaving her to the women, went to smoke in the garden.

"Did I manage all right?" he asked.

"Excellently!"

"Not every one could have done it."

"Don't step on the pansies."

"Hang the flowers!" he said, irritably. "If I'm going to be called upon to keep this up, I must have freedom and liberty. And, by-the-bye, shouldn't trouble too much about the old lady."

"Don't mean to do so."

We entered the summer-house that stood against the wall. The two sides and the porchway were made of wooden logs; on the red bricks were carved initials which we had made years before; our successors had apparently been boys with good manners or without knives.

"I shall get rid of her so soon as we are married," I continued, sitting on the octagonal table, "and send her back to New Cross."

"That's the way," he said.

I went on, glad to have earned his approval. "She may as well stay on for a while until everything gets into good order. She can make herself handy in one way or the other, and it will be giving her a new experience; something she can think about and talk about all her life."

"Please yourself about the moment for sending her back, but see that she doesn't stay on indefinitely."



"There's just this about it," I mentioned. "Mother nags at her and takes every opportunity for reproving her, but all this is only one form of luxury."

"About whom are you speaking?"

"Mrs Croucher."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. After a pause. "Give me a match!"

I found it very pleasant to sit there with Len. We did not trouble to talk much, but now and again he would mention a distant memory suggested by the surroundings; now and again something occurred to me. We were talking about a terrier dog and about the day that it died; I was reminding Len that he locked himself in his room on that occasion for twelve hours when, to my astonishment, he suddenly fell forward on the rustic table, and sobbed. I went round to him and patted his shoulder, refraining from speech lest I should choose the wrong word. It would have been easy to weep with him, but the two gardeners were clipping grass at the edge of the pathway.

"That's what I've been wanting to do," said my brother, recovering, but turning his face away and speaking in a low tone, "wanting to do for years. Wonder why it should have come now."

"It's going to stop," he went on in a louder voice. "I'm about to take a lesson from you. It's not too late for me to turn. I shall get the next train back!"

"Don't hurry away yet."

"Metaphor, little man; I'm talking in the language of metaphor. I shall take the first train back, and change at the proper junction."

"I'm talking seriously," he continued, after a pause, "and you will find out eventually that I mean what I'm now saying."

My mother, when she realised the carriage had been sent away, and that she and Mrs Croucher and I were to begin at once life in a new home, spoke to me regarding the money left by Mrs Latham, demanding to know where it was in-

vested, urging that I should consult Len before entering upon any rash speculation. On Mrs Croucher recommending the Post Office Savings Bank, my mother told her sharply that the matter was one which affected Henry alone, and nobody else had a right to interfere. Mrs Croucher did us another good service later in the evening, when Len had left, by interposing, during a discussion on the question of a good date for a wedding, a comment to the effect that early marriages always had been, always would be a greivous blunder; she herself reached the age of thirty-three before accepting the offer of Police Constable Croucher; my mother declared emphatic opposition to this view, and agreeing that Croucher might have been wise in putting off the ceremony as late as possible, there was no reason why Milly and I should not get married at the earliest opportunity. I walked with my dear girl through Blackheath, through Lewisham, up Loampit Hill, along Lewisham High Road, and we both complained of the shortness of the journey.

The church had outlived a reputation for high services, protesting Churchwardens, Sunday morning fights, and even Mrs Croucher, who remembering this, feared a mob might fill the road, and that we should have clothes torn from our backs, admitted later the only fault she had to find was in the smallness of the congregation. My regret was for the absence of Len who had promised to be my best man, and mother agreed that the ceremony seemed hardly right without him, but the rest did not seem to care greatly; a telegram from Queen Street explained that he could not get away. Stemson gave me leave for three weeks, declaring it would be a pleasure to hold the reins again, and get some of the younger colts into training. In St Donatt's Road we were such a small company at breakfast, that Ernest Fowler had to propose the health of the bride and bridegroom, to reply for his father and mother, and to give the ladies, enjoying himself greatly, and compelling my Aunt Mabel to respond to the last-named toast, which that lady did in a few words that bore mainly on the subject of

a recent dispute between herself and the manager of a South London cemetery. We went up to town to catch the evening boat train, and there was time for me to run across and bid a private good-bye to Len. He came back and saw us off.

"Good luck!" he cried, walking along with the train, and waving his hat joyously. "Thank you for all you have done for me. I'll pay you well some day."

I said more than once to Milly, as the express dashed through Kent, that no one could wish for a more gratifying farewell. Repeating this remark the next day in examining lace shops of the Montagne de la Cour in Brussels, my wife recommended gently that we should for a time dismiss my brother from our thoughts.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A LUCKY MEETING WITH LEN

MY dear wife, with an experience of the Continent that I could not claim, directed the journey, acting as Cook's guide and interpreter, and it was not until we walked down the gangway to the steamer at Boulogne, and an English seaman with S.E. and C.R. on his blue jersey advised us to go below, that I had opportunity of regaining command. The first use made of this was to decide that, as we were both good sailors, we would procure macintoshes and stay on deck. The seaman in giving his help to the scheme mentioned the weather was a jolly sight worse on the other side; he doubted whether the boats at Folkestone would start. I remarked authoritatively that in this case, passengers would go from Dover; he answered that we were going to Dover instead of to Folkestone, but it by no means followed that the outward steamer would make the attempt. I had telegraphed to my offices in London for a messenger to bring letters to Folkestone to meet me and this alteration possessed the elements of annoyance; he comforted by remarking that there were men of brains at Folkestone Harbour who would send the clerk on to the other port. Milly charged me with excessive anxiety to meet business, and I admitted that, happy and delightful as the holiday had been, I did want to get back to Queen Street to see Stemson, home to Blackheath to see my mother, above all to see Len and tell him where we had been.

"Tell me instead," said my wife, nestling under cover of the tarpaulins. The steamer went quietly out of the harbour to find itself cuffed, and struck, and buffeted and gripped by pugilistic waves. "Tell me the names of the



places, so that I may be sure I haven't dreamed some of them."

Only one other passenger had declined the recommendations of the crew, and he gasped up and down with a cigar stuck out between the capacious flaps of his travelling cap, coat collar turned up, and escaping now and again, more by luck than agility, the furious spray. He glanced at us resentfully as one who preferred to be able to report that he had been the only passenger who dared to remain on deck; a sudden lurch sent him in our direction as I arrived, in the recital, at Munich, prepared to describe the journey through Austrian Tyrol.

"Mille pardons," he exclaimed.

My wife bowed.

"Est ce que vous or rather avez vous——"

"You surely can't manage to light a match, Mr Prentice."

"Thank goodness," he roared, "thank goodness, I've found some one who can understand me. But I declare I don't know who it is. Can't tell you from Adam."

"Allow me to introduce you to Eve."

Prentice invited Heaven several times to bless his soul, declared alternately he would have recognised me anywhere; that it was impossible, in the circumstances, to identify anyone. He had been out to Bordeaux to see some firms there, and had done not altogether badly (a Great Tower Street term which I knew meant he had done remarkably well), where he had really scored was in ideas gained that could, later on, be manufactured into verse. On the top of all these came the gale, such a gale as one often heard about but seldom witnessed; G. W. P. confided to us that a title had already come to him, and a good part of the first line.

"You'll be glad to hear," I shouted, "that my brother Len is going on excellently." The noise of the storm prevented Milly from joining in the conversation, and she contented herself by nodding occasionally; she turned aside when I mentioned Len's name.

"Don't know whether I am glad," he replied, using gloved hands as a megaphone, "but I'm certainly surprised."

"You never forget an old grievance."

"Not in matters of business. You wait until some one does you a bad turn in that way, and you'll find that all sentiment goes. You'll come down on them like a hundred of bricks. Matters of business stand altogether apart. Your experience hasn't been so great as mine. I've come across some rotters in my day, but never— All right, I won't say any more for fear of offending the lady. I'm told you're getting on well, at any rate. Did you a good turn, my boy, when I turned you out of Great Tower Street. Funny how everything comes about, isn't it, madam?"

My wife agreed.

"With my peculiar gift," he went on, still at a shout, "I naturally have to take a great interest in everything, but I assure you the tricks providence sometimes does, absolutely stagger me. See how your husband has succeeded for instance! Why, when he came to me as a lad, I never imagined for a moment there was anything special in him. If I gave him a moment's thought, I probably decided he was one of your dull plodders, who might eventually reach his £200 a year and stop there. If it isn't going too far," turning to me, "what is the figure now? In round numbers."

Again Mr Prentice made his appeal to Heaven.

"And you are going home now to a nice comfortable little nest, I'll be bound."

On receipt of the additional information G. W. P. rose hurriedly and left us, lurching up and down the deck, now clutching at a trunk, now at a seat in order to steady himself; Milly suggested he probably wanted to use language which could not be spoken in her presence.

"Of course I'm glad," he bawled, returning and slithering across in front of us. "Immensely gratified. Nothing pleases me more than to think that my efforts have good results. At the same time," he addressed himself to

Milly, "I've been ambling on for years. No one has ever left me a single penny. All the people connected with me expect I shall leave each of them my little all. Seems to me I'm likely to be more unpopular when I'm gone than I am now that I'm living. Suppose he's told you my wife can't stand the sight of me."

A sailor came over in zigzag fashion, eager to be of use; Mr Prentice gave a gesture indicating desire to sweep him from the deck.

"But you have your poetry," I said.

Between the ear flaps, a smile came to the limited space of features; he shook hands with both of us to express, I think, gratitude for the reminder. The gale certainly did not improve as we entered upon the second half of the journey; the steamer appeared unable to make up its mind whether to rest on one side or to stand upright, but nothing short of a complete and total wreck would have stopped G. W. P. from reciting his verses to us; he sat on a high coil of rope at our knees and out-bawled the storm.

"Pretty thought, isn't it?" he screamed. "'As far asunder as the poles!' Strange nobody ever thought of that before. 'And yet we trust that somehow good will be the last and final goals.'"

My wife ventured to say that she seemed to remember hearing lines of a similar intention.

"That's just the danger of it," said G. W. P., regretfully. "I go about quoting my verses, some ignorant chap overhears them, goes home, sits down, writes something almost exactly like them, and—" slapping the coil of ropes, "thinks he's turned out original stuff. The amount of plagiarism that goes on in this world is simply terrible."

Milly preferred to remain in the deck chair, and I left them in order to walk up and down and restore circulation. In passing by each time, one could hear Mr Prentice's voice shouting, "Not like the same person—marvellous improvement—always said he'd make his way!" (from which I was conceited enough to assume he was speaking of me) and

later, "A thoroughly bad nut—no good to himself or anybody else—bound to come to a bad end!" (which induced me to hope the subject had changed).

The *Duchess of York* behaved cautiously outside the harbour before attempting to put its nose inside; bells rang, shouts came from the bridge, passengers came from below greatly astonished to find each other alive. We divested ourselves of tarpaulins and macintoshes, and with the pride that comes of having stood a perilous journey well, rested elbows on the side as the boat went in. My wife took my arm.

"All right?" she said, affectionately.

"Never felt happier in all my life."

"Dear man!"

A line of people stood on the wind-swept lower quay, town porters, station officials, some with bundles of letters, a telegraph boy with a pad of forms, the two men belonging to Scotland Yard who watch arrivals and departures.

"It only needed that," I cried. "Look! There's Len! My own brother Len. How very kind and thoughtful of Stemson to send him! He doesn't see us!"

I waved and called, but Len was in earnest conversation with one of the uniformed officials; seemed to be exhibiting some anger at the information received. A rope sprang from the deck and was secured to one of the stout wooden piles, the gangway fixed, porters hurried up, and the first man took our hand-luggage. I placed Milly in a compartment, and ordered a cup of tea for her before going back to find my brother.

"Is it a fact," he was saying, addressing sharply now the harbour superintendent, "is it finally decided that the boat is not to cross to Calais?"

"That's correct!" answered the other.

"A most infernal piece of bad management," he declared, heatedly.

"Shocking!"

"Who else can I speak to about it?"



"Depends entirely on your religious belief," replied the harassed official. "So far as I know there's nobody here who's responsible for the weather!"

I caught Len's arm as he turned; he seemed to go back a step or two.

"What a day for you to be out!" I cried. "You've come down with the correspondence."

"Come down," he repeated, slowly, "with the correspondence."

"You went to Folkestone and they sent you on here."

"Went to Folkestone, and—they sent me on here."

"Good chap!" heartily. "Now you can travel back with us."

"I'm in no hurry."

"But we have so much to say to you, Len!"

The harbour superintendent returned to mention that it was just possible the outward boat might start in an hour or so; the gale seemed to be moderating, and without accepting the responsibility which the gentleman appeared anxious to fix upon somebody, he felt inclined to say that passengers would be able to get across.

"You don't want to go over," I remarked to my brother.

"Course not!" he said. "I asked simply out of curiosity."

"If I'd known that," declared the harbour superintendent, caustically, "I wouldn't have troubled you so much."

"Worrying times for these people," I said to Len, leading him away, "when the Channel suddenly breaks out into a fit of mad temper. That's the odd thing about the sea; you never know what it is going to do. Human beings can be relied upon."

"You think so."

"That's my experience."

He stopped, and kept perfectly silent as we were going up the slope of the platform. He was about to speak when a porter with baggage divided us, and a line of people

followed; when I crossed a man was engaging him in conversation.

"You know this person, sir?" asked the man, turning to me. I was about to answer proudly, but Len held up his hand.

Mr Prentice came along to tell me that my wife was becoming nervous at my absence; the porters were begging people to take their seats. He glanced at Len.

"It's all over," said Len to me, in a low voice. "You can't save me now."

"Save you?"

"You can't do anything."

"But I will if you only tell me the truth."

"The truth," he remarked, "is a dashed unpleasant thing to have to tell."

"What do you know about this gentleman?" asked the man, who held my brother's arm.

"If I told you the good I knew of him," answered Mr Prentice, vehemently, "you wouldn't be any the wiser; if I told you the bad I knew of him, we should have to stay here for a week."

"This," I protested, vigorously, "is spite!"

"His name's Leonard Drew; he was once in my employment, and I had to sack him; he's now in a firm in Queen Street, City. What did you say was the name of your firm?" he asked of me.

"Seems to me," said the man, "that we may as well all travel up together. Unless the lady objects. She needn't know what our business is. I'll take charge of your bag," he said to Len, "and the remainder of your Paris ticket."

I shall never forget the easy manner adopted by Len on that journey, as compared with my own distress and the reserve of the two other men. My wife could not help being influenced by his courteous behaviour; he kept the conversation going with no apparent effort. Trafoi? He was so glad we did not miss Trafoi. Did waitresses at the

hotel there still dress in costumes of the country, and were the guides with bunches of edelweiss in their hats standing about outside to conduct nervous climbers up gentle heights? Len felt sorry it rained at Innsbruck, regretted we were not fortunate enough to see the religious play at Oberammergau. A wonderfully impressive thing this; he defied anyone to sit there watching without experiencing a lump in the throat, a keen desire to lead a better life. What was that great sentence of some one's concerning religion; that if it did not exist, it would have to be invented? Len admitted he liked travelling; a shockingly unpatriotic thing to say perhaps, but he had a positive craving to live in any other country but England. My wife could not agree with him here, but he insisted, with a glance at me, that in our colonies, for instance, there was room for a man to breathe, to move, and to fight; he himself had a great anxiety to settle down in Australia. He believed the climate was something we English-folk could only dimly imagine.

I saw my wife into the North Kent train, begging her to excuse me. We went in a four-wheeler to Queen Street where I found the clerk who had returned from Folkestone, and took possession of the bundle of letters; telephoned to Stemson at Prince's Gate. When he arrived, we started a conference that lasted for two hours.

## CHAPTER XXV

### LEN AT THE DOCKS

MY mother was inclined to blame the tea taken out on the lawn on the afternoon of the first day, and after some deliberation, fixed the whole of the responsibility on Mrs Croucher who, fortunately for herself had gone back to Woodpecker Road in the company of a tin trunk containing a supply of dresses and bonnets from which Milly had induced my mother to part, making room for those of a newer date and fashion. Mrs Croucher ought to have noticed that the grass was slightly damp; the wonder was, with such a careless, stupid woman about the place that all of us present on that occasion were not being ordered abroad, necessitating the chartering of a special steamer. The one excellent point to be borne in mind, was in my mother's view, that Len could well afford to take the journey, and if, as had been hinted to her, he should decide to reside permanently, for the sake of his health, on the other side of the globe, he could be trusted to keep his footing there. (I feel sure my mother had an idea that folk in New South Wales walked as flies on a ceiling.) Hers would be the duty to see that a Christmas pudding was sent out to him every year. On finding this would be eaten in summer weather, my mother gave thanks that she remained in a country where the climate, at any rate, knew how to behave in a sensible manner.

"Talking of which," she remarked, smoothing the skirt of a new dress contentedly, "I'm afraid you don't realise, Henry, all your brother is doing for you. He's allowing us to stay on here, rent free."

"We have made an arrangement with him," interposed



Milly. She disregarded my look of warning. "It has only been a question of terms, and Len appears to be satisfied."

"Too good mannered to show that he isn't, my dear. Of course if I'm kept in the dark, I can't be expected to see these things in the light you do, but I should like to have Henry's word that he hasn't been niggardly in the dealings."

"You can take it, mother, that I have been as generous as it was possible for me to be."

"Such a difference between them," she remarked, addressing my wife again. "You've no idea. Even as children Len was always the one to get rid of his toys and Henry, here, was the one to hoard them up. Now, I'm going to make a suggestion, and if you two consider it's likely to cost too much money, why I'll trot down to Blackheath village and take something out of the post-office."

The dear soul felt hurt on discovering her recommendation had been anticipated; that we had already issued invitations to the available members of the Drew family, begging them to come to dinner at Vanbrugh Park, that they might bid farewell to Len. The number was not great: Aunt Mabel and her married daughter and the husband, the daughter who had remained single, a Drew at Orpington who had once been called young, because he had less years than my father possessed, but could now, by the stern rules of arithmetic, never expect to see sixty again, and (besides ourselves) that was all. My mother wanted to include the Fowlers, but Milly declared, with great sense, that if we went outside the family, we should scarcely know where to stop, and with the necessity of keeping in my mind the exact proportions of knowledge possessed by each individual, I seconded the amendment and it was carried. My mother announced that it seemed a skimpy way of doing a thing not likely to happen again, and I found a cutting on my study desk cut from a local paper, which she alone read, entitled "Strange End of a Miser."

There was no time to lose, for a berth had been unex-

pectedly placed at our disposal by the shipping agents in Leadenhall Street, and I was bound under the agreement with Stenson to get Len out of the country at the earliest possible moment. The sailing was arranged for Saturday morning; the date of the dinner had to be fixed for Friday night. Meanwhile I caught each evening a good train from Cannon Street, in order to enjoy all the available moments in my brother's company. He was at his best during those three days, courteous to Milly, affectionate with mother, always genial with me, excepting at one moment when I asked whether he would care for his wife to be invited. He emptied his tumbler and threw it into the grate violently.

"Sorry!" he said, after two minutes of silence. "Couldn't help it. If I had married some one else, even if I could now marry some one else— She won't take any action," he went on, grimly. "I've given her opportunities, but she won't watch; I've had her watched and she won't give opportunities. So here am I, separated from her and yet chained to her for the rest of my life!"

"It began wrongly."

"That wouldn't have mattered," he said, with his arms across the table and fingers clenched, "if only—if only there had been children. I've never spoken to anybody about it before, and I don't know why I speak of it now, but if there had been but one boy to call me—to call me father!"

He was in another mood in less time than it took me to cut the end of a cigar for him. "See that a couple of boxes of these are packed up, will you?" he directed. "They'll be useful to give away on the voyage out. And think of something I can give your wife as a present. And something for mother. And something for yourself."

"You needn't waste your money on us, Len."

"Not my money," he retorted, airily, "yours!"

Len received the guests at the top of the staircase on the Friday evening at seven, Milly and I standing immediately behind, and not one of them could have guessed that a few

days previously his liberty had been in danger. Accepted their thanks for the invitation, and with a movement of the hand, conveyed the hint that some of the acknowledgments should be given to us. The Orpington uncle could see a resemblance between my father and Len, especially about the mouth ; he considered that I favoured my mother. This topic, communicated to the rest, created a lively debate before dinner, and Aunt Mabel's married daughter declared both of her children had their father's nose ; her sister expressed the opinion that this constituted a defect likely to stand in their way in years to come. I noticed that Len went across and spoke to the married cousin, asking after the health of the children, and promising to send presents to them from Sydney.

"Often tell them about their Uncle Len as they call you," she declared, "you wouldn't believe how proud they are of you."

"That's good !" he said, heartily. "Next to having a child of one's own— Henry, you take Aunt Mabel. Not quite enough men I'm afraid to go round. The ladies must make the most of us."

They were, at the sweets, rallying the single cousin from Peckham on her austerity of manner, and her mother was offering, as excuse, the circumstance that out of twelve recent commissions no less than nine had been gentlemen, when one of the maids brought a card to my wife ; she spoke to me down the table.

"Mrs Thomas ?" I repeated. "No, I don't know the name at all."

"Send down word that you can't see her," ordered Len.

"There was a Thomas once at New Cross," remarked my mother. "Lodged at the Croucher's and he was a luggage-labeller at Charing Cross."

"If it's anyone who wants help—" began my wife, starting up.

"Now I think of it, my dear, I remember Thomas was his Christian name."

"How absurd of me to forget," I cried, suddenly. "Why, of course, it's Kitty!"

"Kitty must come up," decided my brother, promptly. "I shall be extremely glad to see Kitty once more. Kitty must drink my health."

She came in with apologies, but my wife would not listen to these, and took her furs and her hat, and Len brought a chair to the table that she might sit next to him; she moved this to my end, and, slightly flurried at first, soon became composed. A very pleasant figure to look at, with features which, once they had lost the early look of nervousness, gave signs of perfect calm; she answered my mother's searching questions easily, accepted the news of my brother's impending departure with a correct blend of surprise and regret. Kitty had left the sea-side town, because she heard of a school near Westerham.

"Why," exclaimed the Orpington uncle, "you're the good-looking woman with the curly-haired boy. Good gracious! I know you both by sight as well as I know my own front door. Smart little chap in a sailor suit, who struts along trying to keep in step with his mother. Talk of the neighbourhood."

"In what way?" she asked, quickly.

"Because he's such a healthy youngster."

"I see."

"This is all news to me," remarked Len. "I had no idea, Kitty, you were married. What is the boy's father like?"

"He is no longer alive," I interposed.

"A great deal wiser," decided Aunt Mabel, "to come to a London firm that's got everything ready at hand, than to allow yourself to be imposed upon by country muddlers, and so forth, and so on. If it isn't a rude question, ma'am, what did it run you into?"

"You might bring the boy down to the docks to-morrow morning," I said, turning the conversation. "It would interest him, and it would give him an opportunity of seeing Len for once in his life."

"That will not be convenient," said Kitty, with decision.



"I don't want anybody but Henry to see me off," remarked Len, definitely. "If there's one thing I dislike, it is tears."

The married cousin came round to discuss children and compare dates of children and their progress; I edged back my chair and thought of the Sunday evening in old Latham's office when everything seemed in a tangle that defied straightening out. The uncle wanted to smoke, and we went through the windows to the lawn at the side of the house, strolling up and down the gravelled path. The old gentleman said he made it a practice to take a brisk walk after dinner and Len, who seemed apprehensive of a farewell lecture for me (which, in truth, I had no thought of giving) fetched hats and sticks, instructing me to look after the ladies; they went off. I sauntered across to the summer-house and tried to realise that this was the last evening I could spend in the company of my brother. To-morrow night at this time we should have to think of him as well down the Channel, the next night as in the Bay, in five days' time at Gibraltar.

"Don't tell me," said Milly's voice, "unless you really want to do so. I'm not curious."

"But I must tell somebody," said Kitty, "and I feel I ought to tell you. You're a good woman, and good women are generally severe, but I have an idea you can afford to be generous."

"That is true!"

It would have been possible for me to come out and interrupt, but I did not greatly care that they should see my eyes just then. To my relief, they walked away.

"And I wish you to understand," said Kitty, eagerly, as they returned, "this is the only revenge I want to take; that he shall never see the boy. Never see his boy. I advise no girl to behave as I did but——"

I made my escape as they strolled on; went into the dining-room where the ladies were talking in confidential tones of something expected to happen in the following April; my mother, jumping up, declared that Milly ought

not to be out in the evening air and hurried to fetch her, the while others began to speak at random of different subjects. Kitty and Milly came in; there seemed a new friendliness between them. When Kitty took her leave, without waiting to see Len again, my wife kissed her affectionately, and gave a promise to drive down to Westerham.

I sat up with Len that night until nearly one o'clock, and looking back, it is not easy to recall any time when he appeared in better spirits; a lad setting out in life could not have been more enthusiastic or more sanguine. If all went well on the other side—and Len knew of no reason why everything should not go excellently—he hoped I would run out there some time and give him a chance of showing hospitality. I must be prepared to put up with a good deal of mutton in the bills of fare, but all else would be guaranteed beyond criticism. If any children came, the sea journey would do them an enormous amount of good; it had always been his ambition to take a boy around the world, for that would supply something which Shrewsbury could never furnish. I remember we talked a good deal about the bringing-up of children, and I listened with proper deference of views.

Len was just as fresh and animated when we started in the early morning, running into my mother's room to give a final good-bye, and reciprocating the farewell wave given by my wife at her window. We drove through Greenwich in the direction of Blackwall Tunnel; the moment he caught sight of the river and the shipping, he stopped talking, and I could get no word from him. We reached the Dock gates, and walked through the long, muddy spaces with traffic and business hustling each other, arriving at the quay side before the London train came in. On deck, I had to do everything for him. Found his cabin, looked after his luggage, introduced him to the officers, secured his place at the tables. The train emptied a crowd of excited voyagers and companions, with every man and every woman struggling desperately to ensure their own comforts; friends encouraging, and feeling in pockets to make sure that handkerchiefs were

there. More than once in the time that ensued, I made fresh efforts to make him speak, but he preserved silence. Not until the last bell rang, did he turn, taking my shoulders in the old way.

"Little man, little man!" he cried, brokenly. "What a fool I have been to myself."

"Best and dearest brother," I declared, "to me."

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